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WALKING WITH THE WAMPUS

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee

Abigail Grace Griffith
May 2012

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For my teachers,

old and new–

who taught me how to climb the mountain,

and for JH, TB, LH, AH, NN, and KB–

who lit the path back down.

ABSTRACT

In *Walking with the Wampus*, Abigail (Abby) Griffith offers a collection of short stories that toe the slippery stream that runs between the shores of the fantastic and the mundane. Challenging preconceptions of what might be traditionally defined as "literary fiction," Griffith's stories are three parts surrealism to two parts metafiction. Fairy tales that come equipped with teeth and a twist, this collection introduces readers to a ragtag variety of characters, including: a girl who turns everything she touches to ice and the Devil who loves her, a kid cursed with a mother who just might be a goldfish, a serial killer who just can't seem to catch a break, and a winged man who loves a little Led Zeppelin in the morning.

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I like things to be story shaped.
Reality, however, is not story-shaped, and the eruptions of the odd into our lives are not story-shaped either. They do not end in entirely satisfactory ways. Recounting the strange is like telling one's dreams: one can communicate the events of a dream but not the emotional content, the way that a dream can color one's entire day.

-"The Flints of Memory Lane," Neil Gaiman

Walking with the Wampus

Ophiocordyceps unilateralis is a parasitoid fungus that infects the *Camponotus leonardi* ant. The fungi's sole means of reproduction involves the release of spores, which then enter the ant's body, and consume non-vital soft tissues. The spores spread, releasing compounds that cause their victim to exhibit what researchers have called "zombie-like" behavior. Infected ants stumble to the top of a plant, and utilizing abnormal mandible strength, secure themselves to its stem. The fungus then kills the ant, and continues to feed on its soft tissues, all the while fortifying its host's increasingly hollow exoskeleton. The spreading spores produce mycelia that further anchor the ant's body to the plant, until the fungus is ready produce, at which point its fruiting body, a bulbed protuberance, grows from the ant's head and ruptures, releasing new spores.

The fungus finely tunes the ant to its every need; the ants attach themselves to stems located approximately 25 centimeters above the ground, on the plant's north side, in an environment with a humidity and temperature to the spore's particular liking. Entomologists have found mass graves where entire colonies of ants have been all but wiped out by *ophiocordyceps unilateralis*. The corpses are located in close proximity to each other–twenty, thirty, forty ants, with phallic brain stalks held high. The dead ants show signs of having been

ravaged by their murderer's fuzzy mycelia long after the fungus dies, their empty exoskeletons clustered like huddled unicorns, horned and pale.

Some believe that ingesting members of this particular fungal family can lead to increased sexual arousal.

*

On the night of February 1, 1959, a team of nine cross-country skiers fled the warm confines of their tent deep in the Soviet Union's snow-capped Ural mountain range. Experienced trekkers all, they abandoned the campsite on the eastern shoulder of the mountain Kholat Syahkl for a nearby forest, shredding their tent and scattering supplies in their desperate attempts to escape. Within several hours, the entire team had perished. Investigators found no evidence of an avalanche, no sign that the friends had fled man or beast–or Soviet missile. No one has yet to adequately explain why nine wilderness-savvy skiers panicked, tore through canvas, and stumbled into weather conditions that could end only in disorientation, frostbite, and death.

Search parties located the frozen remains of the ill-fated skiers on two separate occasions. On February 26th, two bodies and signs of a campfire were discovered beneath a cedar tree whose bark showed trace amounts of blood and human tissue–evidence of where the two men had broken away branches until their hands grew raw. The body of the team's leader, 23-year-old Igor Dyatlov, lay nearby, stretched along the swath of frigid ground between the forest and the original campsite. He was found with one hand raised, as if he sought to protect

his head. His other hand clutched at a small twig taken from a close-by birch tree. Nearer to the campsite, their bodies pointed tent-wards, two more of Dyatlov's colleagues were located facedown and frozen in the drifted snow. Despite the hostile weather conditions, several of the skiers were clothed only in undergarments and mismatched socks. And while rust-colored snow framed the head of Rustim Slobodin, who suffered a 17-centimeter fracture to the skull, all five of the skiers were found to have died due to hypothermia.

On May 4th, the bodies of the remaining team members were located in a nearby forest ravine, buried beneath four meters of ice and snow. Three of the skiers had suffered massive internal injuries; their cause of death was declared mass hemorrhaging due to an assortment of broken ribs and fractured skulls. Lyudmilla Dubinia's tongue and oral cavity were noticeably absent, removed by the elements or perhaps by animals, her open mouth an easy target for those who would eat away at the frozen image of her final gasp. Alexander Kolotov, the last skier to expire, died alone and uninjured, having had little choice but to succumb to sleep, huddled beneath the jumbled corpses of his fallen friends.

*

My younger brother and I had several babysitters growing up, three of whom made a point of repeatedly telling our parents they didn't like our house's kitchen. They said the room gave them the creeps, and that they tried to avoid it at night, after we had gone to bed. All three of them failed to identify just why they felt the way they did.

But I didn't know about their concerns, or their general recalcitrance, until much later in life, never thought to share their fear until one night, long after my brother and I no longer needed a babysitter, I crept downstairs to quiet a barking dog. Our family's Labrador had woken all four members of my family, and as I was our home's resident insomniac, it fell on me to see what had disturbed him. When I reached the kitchen, I found our yellow lab engaged in a stand-off with some unseen villain, his hackles raised and his canines exposed. Growling, he was impossible to quiet, and try as I might to haul him into the other room he planted his one-hundred pounds and refused to give an inch. At first, I was just annoyed. I figured I'd wait out this random fit; Drury had a tendency to bark at what he perceived to be threats on our town quiet streets only to roll over and return to bed upon discovering there was nothing to be alarmed about. On this night, however, he refused to settle, and rather than slink back to bed, he began to whine, not like a dog, but like a frightened horse—long and shrill.

I had never seen him make such a racket, and it was only when he started doing so, that I began to feel that his behavior was perhaps in response to something not outside the kitchen, but in it. He seemed particularly fixated on one space just to the right of our kitchen table, and refused to walk through it, though the space appeared much like every other dark corner of the room. Even his intermittent growls disturbed me, as I had never, and have never since, seen this animal growl in even the most stressful of circumstances. Suitably spooked, both by his behavior, and by some bundle of nerves lodged deep in my hindbrain, I somehow managed to drag the dog to the living room, and flee

upstairs to crash on my parents' floor for the night—something I hadn't done in over a decade.

The next morning, when I regaled my dad with the evening's events in the very same kitchen in which they had occurred, he laughed, and said, "Well, your babysitters always did hate this kitchen."

My mom frowned and set a plate of French toast on the table for us to fight over.

"You know, you shouldn't make fun of them. A man did shoot himself in here, after all."

"What?!" my brother and I said in unison, spitting coffee and crumbs.

My father shrugged.

"I never thought it was worth mentioning," he said. "I mean, it happened way before your mother and I had bought the house."

I stared at him, waiting for some kind of explanation, but he merely picked up his newspaper in one hand, and poured a crock of maple syrup with the other.

*

When taken from the tongue of the indigenous Mansi, "Kholat Syahkl" roughly translates as "Mountain of Death."

*

All of the above information is true.

*

All of the above information is also what comes to mind when I hear critics who persist in asking why certain writers produce work that's fantastic or "fabulist" in nature. I'm one of those writers, and when I hear that question, I'm tempted to mutter, "My family's kitchen might be haunted, we're living in a world where zombie ants are a reality, and you think my fiction isn't realistic enough?" Or, perhaps, "Go find what frightened those nine skiers, and I'll tell you why I write magical realism." Or, even more simply, "Spend fifteen minutes on Wikipedia, and you're almost guaranteed to find an article that's weirder than the story I just read." It's that oldest of adages: the truth is stranger than fiction.

I suppose I could also offer this response: that so-called realist fiction is no more real than a short story featuring fallen angels or alien invaders; that fiction of all kinds is inaccurate in its representation of time, and place, and character; that no work of literature can ever aspire to be more than some frail simulacrum of the world it seeks to represent; that fiction is forever a commentary on life, rather than the act of life itself. Such is the answer that comes howling down the halls of The Academy, long trumpeted by scholars who seek to combat attacks on fabulist literature, and what a fine response it is. It certainly has the ring of truth to it.

But I'm weary of the argument, and increasingly, it would seem, so are the critics. Fabulist literature has crept back into classrooms, and workshops, and onto featured shelves at the big name bookstores. To defend fabulist

literature feels like a stale argument at best, and an insult at worst; why should anyone have to defend a literary vein that features the likes of Borges and Garcia Marquez, Calvino and Cortázar, Nabokov and Rushdie? To argue for the validity of such literature seems a slap in the face to those writers who are currently dipping into the well of their fabulist literary forbearers–a stalwart gang of rogue soldiers who have come from the camps of Literature and Genre to shake hands and share cigarettes across the DMZ. To compile a list of those whose have fraternized with the so-called enemy would be nigh impossible at this late stage of the game, for it's a list that increases daily.

So, let's dismiss such an argument, for rogue literary fabulists have long since fortified their stronghold, with more defectors arriving ever daily. You might say such an argument is just as insulting to realists, as it creates a false dichotomy. I'm a lover of good stories, regardless of their packaging, and I'm certainly not alone. I know realists who love fabulist fiction and fabulist fiction writers who can't get enough of realism. The question isn't, "why is this kind of fiction better or worse than another?" Instead, it's a question of which stylistic tradition is perhaps best suited to which subject matter. Granted, each work of fiction stands or falls on its own merits, not the merits of an entire genre. Still, let's ponder this better inquiry, a question that seems more worthy of a critic's consideration: what can fabulist literature do that realist fiction perhaps cannot?

I believe the answer to such a question is twofold. First, fabulist literature helps both readers and writers grapple with those moments when the strange and ultimately unknowable encroaches upon their daily routines. The oddest moments in our lives are often the hardest to communicate, as such events,

whether they fall under the category of trauma or dream, fantasy or fright, are frequently difficult to contextualize without the aid of narrative. If stories help us to better understand and order events in our lives and in the world around us, then fabulist stories help us to better understand and order those events in our lives that are decidedly *not* in the realm of our daily routines. We can't know what frightened those skiers, so we craft elaborate conspiracies involving Soviet conspiracies, UFO sightings, and Yeti, for while these solutions belong to the world of the supernatural or the science fictional, they are still explanations for what would otherwise be an unknowable event.

However, I don't mean to suggest that the subject matter of all such literature must be as extreme as the Dyatlov Pass incident. Fabulist literature also gives us a method by which we might better communicate the sheer strangeness of our daily lives, our daily landscapes, our daily loves. That which is familiar to some may be infinitely strange to others, and it is this friction between the mundane and absurd that has yielded a large portion of today's fabulist literature, from the deliciously odd and yet oddly familiar works of Karen Russell to sharpest satires of George Saunders.

Additionally, I have found that fabulist literature often allows me to communicate landscapes that tend to elude more traditional literary approaches. Having lived in the great state of Tennessee now for a little less than two years, I still struggle to find the language to describe the grotesque carnival roads of Pigeon Forge, or the odd flutter you feel in your stomach when you realize the lake you're swimming in was once a thriving town. That doesn't even begin to touch upon the sea of orange-clad fans descending upon Knoxville during game

days, or the Mississippi creeping over its banks on up Beale Street, or gut-clenching waves of steel-blue mountains in winter, or that time three friends and I climbed to the top of Gregory Bald, where we found nothing but a small herd of deer who greeted us like long-lost relatives. Lately, the stories I'm writing are working to communicate the weight these images carry. They're stories of ramshackle Atlantises, and pale hounds on never-ending hunts. They're tales featuring haunted tulip poplars, and rivers that carry fish from other times, and other countries, and a barbecue joint that sells the ribs that can tell you your future. Writing in a fabulist vein has given me the ability to contexualize a region that I've otherwise found hard to put into words.

This kind of talk, of course, isn't to encourage exoticism or–as might be the temptation in this particular case–portrayals of some idealized or stereotypical "Great South"; rather, I would hope that that fiction responding to particular environments would emphasize that every place, no matter how seemingly mundane, offers the possibility for exploring the strange and the uncanny. If we are all the products of our own strange environs, if we are all as Joyce Carol Oates says, "regionalist in our origins," than who's to say that any one location is more "exotic," more dated, or more worthy of our attention than another?

*

However, perhaps a more significant goal of strange fiction is not just that it seek to put words to that which would otherwise be indescribable, but that it

also allows writers to make strange for us that which has become stale and familiar. This, I'll grant you, is anything but a novel concept, and I'm not about to pretend otherwise–our old friends the Modernists would certainly come clawing at my door. Make it new, shouts Ezra Pound! Defamiliarize it, for god's sake. Making something strange for the sake of art is certainly not what anyone would call a new technique. It isn't even a very original one.

But a writer's reasons for employing such techniques have evolved. The modernists sought to make meaning through art, to make sense of a world they found increasingly meaningless. The postmodernists embraced this fractured world, and tended to employ a more playful approach than their modernist forebears, reveling in an environment where all knowledge is relative, all meaning fluid and ever-changing. Where then might we place those whom Annie Dillard calls "contemporary modernists" on this literary timeline? Rather than making it new, I would suggest such writers are making it strange–making it magic. As Rikki Ducornet decries in her introduction to *Paraspheres*, mass production and "a criminal lack of imagination is making of our fragile world a flatland," a world that perhaps lacks the magic it once had. In an age where we can access endless information and up-to-the-minute news via the internet, where cartography has all but become an obsolete skill, where we can trace the thoughts of our friends and families and even our favorite (or, let's face it, least favorite) celebrities through endless Twitter updates, Facebook statuses, and Pinterest boards, what mysteries could possibly remain untouched, or untainted? And while postmodern writers like Pynchon, and Delillo, and even younger writers like Richard Powers or David Foster Wallace frequently took (and take)

great pleasure in calling attention to the relativism inherent in our media-driven age, their work was (and is) often more concerned with calling attention to the nature of our relationship to such "knowledge," rather than what the ramifications of such a relationship might be. If the postmodernists have strived to make us more aware of our unstable relationship with reality, than it would seem to me that the contemporary writer might in turn take advantage of such an instability and create texts that reflect and respond more directly to this fluid world in which we live. One of the key strengths of fabulist fiction then, is that it reassures us that we have not exhausted the world of its mysteries, while it in turn forces us to confront that there are still areas of our lives of which we lack any knowledge at all. Such fiction encourages us to seek out the white space at the edges of the map, to look high and low for the locations where monsters still lurk– somewhere safely beyond the eye of Google Maps.

Indeed, if fabulist fiction has anything approaching a universal goal, I would propose that it is this: to fight certainty. And yet, you might argue, isn't certainty a reassuring presence? Wouldn't we all appreciate a little more certainty in our own lives? Perhaps. But I can't help thinking that in an era where we presume to know so much more than we can possibly stand, certainty is the enemy–the most silent of killers. In the past five years, three of my close friends have contemplated suicide, with two having actually attempted it. While all three gave very different reasons for arriving at such a decision, and while all three struggled with their own distinct psychological illnesses, I was struck, in talking with them (after the fact), by one commonality: certainty. In all three cases, and in particular the two cases in which two of my closest male friends

actually attempted to take their lives, these people spoke of killing themselves with such certainty that I could not help but be struck by the similarity of their justifications: their certainty that death was better than the lives they were living, their certainty that dying would be a peaceful experience, their certainty that loved ones would not miss them–that they may even be better off without them, and above all, their certainty that the trajectory of the world would not–and cannot–alter. Certainty's the killer. More and more, I can't help but wonder if isn't the writer's job to combat that certainty, to create stories that fight such assuredness. Because at the end of the day, many of us aren't afraid of the "unknown." Rather than fearing what we don't know, some of us fear what we *do* know. We fear that we know everything, and have found it wanting. We fear, perhaps above all, what we think we know about death. The ambassador's wife from Kurt Vonnegeut's *Cat's Cradle* claims that Americans are unhappy because they are "forever searching for love in forms it never takes, in places it can never be." Our belief that such places and such forms cannot exist is all but shattered when we finally see them in narrative form. Fabulist literature, with its stories that actively engage with the inexplicable and the odd, the what-ifs and the maybes, reassures us that we do not, and in fact, cannot, know our world. We are reassured not by knowledge, but rather our lack thereof.

This genre of literature, therefore, might seem at direct odds with science, a field of study that would seem to make that which is unknown "known." And yet, I think that such fiction functions not in conflict with science, but rather as its companion. Science may, like some forms of fabulist literature, put a narrative to those events we could not previously verbalize, but of course, scientific

discoveries also frequently make weird a world we thought we understood. And much like science, fiction rarely provides its fans with any certainty. Facts are rare, while theories prove endless. Annie Dillard believes that "science works the way a tight-rope walker works: by not looking at its feet. As soon as it looks at its feet, it realizes it is operating in midair." Perhaps fabulist literature is what happens when science finally looks down. Ironically, the literature of the unreal serves much the same purpose as the science of the so-called real: both reassure us that every place is fantastic, every person unknowable, every creature a world unto itself.

It seems to me then, that the work of not just fabulists, but also scientists, historicists, experimentalists, romanticists, and yes, realists is to make strange the world around us--to craft a world worth exploring, a world that has not lost its ability to surprise and seduce, to horrify and astonish. And yes, we as readers will always crave moments of connection with characters, or places, in the text, and will always hunger for those passages where it becomes clear that surely, the author has crafted a particular scene for us, and us alone. And yet isn't part of our pleasure in experiencing such a moment derived from the shock of such familiarity on the part of the writer? After all, how could someone share our own experiences or deepest thoughts so completely? How could someone, oftentimes a someone thousands of miles away and perhaps even centuries ago, have written something that speaks so eloquently to the darkest corners of our most secret selves? Good fiction, whether it be fabulist in nature or otherwise, surely thrives on shocks such as these.

*

Perhaps the best way to illustrate what I think fabulist fiction is capable of is with an example from my own, decidedly non-fabulist life. Last summer, a few friends and I packed a picnic and headed to the mountain-framed valley of Cades Cove. It was after dark, and we nursed the rather stupid, if romantic, urge to hike a short distance to a nearby cabin and have our feast on the wood floor of a Civil War-era dwelling. It wasn't, I'm fairly certain, an entirely legal operation, especially considering the backpack of beer we'd brought with us, but the night was warm, the cove was dark, and we felt that surely anyone we met on such an evening could only wish us well. To be fair, we were each of us graduate students in English; we still believed in things like the "pastoral." And so we walked through the woods, carrying bags of beer, and bread, and three kinds of cheese. Packs of Oreos crackled in a purse or two, and my shoulders sagged under the weight of brownies, a six-pack, and a two-pound bag of gummy bears. Hungry and hot, we didn't talk much, just shuffled along in relative silence.

We were halfway to the cabin when we heard it: a scream that lasted for nearly a minute, continuous and unearthly. We froze as one, our eyes wide and white-rimmed in the light of a yellow moon. The noise came from a location some distance away from the cove's nearby campsite, and didn't sound like children, but rather like a woman. Or maybe a banshee. In any case, the sound now stood between the five of us and the car we had come in. Panicked, we sped-walked to our destination, as coyote cries echoed from mountain to mountain in the wake of the spine-quaking scream.

Later, after most of the food had been eaten, the beer drank, and the leftover Oreos had been fed to the horses that sometimes called the cove home, we speculated aloud over what had made such a terrible sound. Brave now that we were several hours removed from the actual event, as well as full of food and more than a little drunk, we spoke of mountain lions and murderers, bear maulings and haints. Though we all knew the source of the scream was most likely a bobcat, or maybe the dying wail of an unlucky rabbit, we tried to spook each other with increasingly outlandish tales on the long walk back to the car. I don't remember all of the scenarios we concocted, but one in particular has stayed with me. One of my friends, a local who'd grown up not far from the mountains herself, said that perhaps what we'd heard had been the cry of a Wampus Cat, a mythical were-feline who walked the mountains on two legs and whose very presence was an omen of death. I laughed then at the image of a pack of half-drunk idiot students being paced by an overgrown pussycat, but now, a year out, I can't help but think that writing may be nothing more than taking that cat by the paw and making it cry. Fabulist fiction is not unlike strolling down a forest path at night—you're familiar with the route, perhaps, but you're never quite sure what might be lurking behind that hemlock, or crouched in that ditch. Writers of such fiction are always walking with the wampus, crafting tales where that cry in the woods might spell death, or might spell something else entirely–something we've yet to even dream of.

A Good Ghost Story

There are rules to be followed when telling a ghost story, rules that must be adhered to if one hopes to cause even a single goose bump, or one silly, high shriek

A good ghost story, for instance, never features a happy ghost. There is no such creature. A ghost story full of good-natured ghosts, happy spirits, or cheerful poltergeists is no ghost story at all. The happy dead do not linger. Such spirits do not brush the lives of the living, for they know they'll see their loved ones soon enough.

The happy dead are all alike, but every unhappy ghost is unhappy in its own way. The ghost in my house is very different from the one who haunts the apartment complex down the street. The story I tell about my ghost will never be the story you tell about yours. The rib-quaking, hair-tickling chill my brother felt upon encountering our ghost was like the chill you'd feel when listening to a perfect line of music. The chill you feel upon encountering *your* ghost is laced with déjà vu, a feeling not unlike the one you encounter when reading a line in a

newly published book you can't help but feel you've read before. Each ghost brings its own feeling and its own story. No two are identical.

Why tell stories about the unhappy dead? Because stories about the unhappy dead are infinitely less boring than platitudes about the happily saved.

*

My kitchen is haunted. I know this because, once, my brother encountered its ghostly inhabitant. Summer vacation was almost over. Our parents had left for New York City to take in a show, taking advantage of my brother's last full week at home. They felt better leaving Drake, the family dog, under his watch. My mother couldn't bear the thought of our admittedly cowardly German shepherd crouched and whimpering on an unfamiliar concrete floor, and she frequently coerced one relative or another into looking after him when the family was away. My brother was more than willing to take care of the dog in their absence; his latest girlfriend had the night off, and her parents thought she was sleeping over at a friend's. So, it was just the three of them at home the night my brother discovered our kitchen's secret.

The girlfriend fell asleep before midnight, but my brother, a perpetual night owl, crept back downstairs. He passed the time playing computer games at the kitchen table. He rarely moved, stirring only occasionally to stretch or to make sure the dog had enough water. Dazed by the flickering light of his laptop screen, his eyes began to droop. His mouth hung half-open, caught somewhere between a snore and a sigh.

It is likely my brother believed he was dreaming, at first. There were strange noises coming from our mother's kitchen cabinets, and for a moment he believed he was lost in sleep, that the kitchen before him was nothing but a memory, a distorted image dredged up from the depths of his subconscious. He listened to the noises without moving. *Scritch, scritch, scritch*. A mouse, he thought. And then a *thump*. And then nothing. He let his eyelids drop.

He did fall asleep then, but he was jerked back by our dog's high, insistent whine. He laid a hand on Drake's head and rose, thinking that perhaps he needed to go outside, or that one of the neighbor's cats had crept onto the side-porch. But the dog stayed stuck tight to his knee, his whining increasing in volume with every strange sound. My brother scratched reassuringly behind Drake's ears and surveyed the kitchen with red-rimmed eyes.

Scritch, scritch, scritch.

It was then my brother realized that something was inarguably, unnervingly wrong. He shuddered and froze, convinced there was something lurking under the fridge, in a cupboard, behind the stove. There had always been stories about the kitchen, though my brother had never believed them, not really. What the town knew about our home's history was based on gossip and the occasional tall tale, whispered over diner coffee mugs or uttered behind water coolers. My brother had never put much stock in such chatter, had never even given it much thought prior to that evening in the kitchen.

The dog's whine became a growl, low and otherworldly. With hackles raised, he circled my brother like a hellhound, his herding instinct suddenly strong in the face of an unseen threat. The noises came and went. Mice, my

brother hoped. Mice, he prayed fervently, though we had never had mice before. But mice could not explain the way in which the cupboard doors began to swing open and shut in succession, each one slamming back into place with military-like precision. One after another, the cupboards closed, as though a tiny pair of hands was running down the row.

My brother said later that he was afraid to close his eyes, scared that if he did so whatever was lurking nearby might use his temporary blindness to its advantage, and yet neither could he bring himself to glance left or right. The corners of his sightline were blurred by poor light and something else, a foggy image that lingered in the glass panes of the bay window and the disturbed surface of the dog's water bowl. He was sure that had he but turned, he would've seen something. The dog could see it. He knew it could.

My brother remained frozen for some time, body motionless in the face of too many conflicting commands. There was nothing there, his brain said. There was *something* there, his blood said. Something has always been there, the dog said, howling sharp and short.

But the moment passed. The cupboards stuttered and clapped one final time, their wooden doors knocking into place with organic thuds. The dog's hair lowered. His growl faded to a friendly pant. The noises stopped. My brother moved.

In the morning, over chipped bowls of cereal, my brother recounted his experience to his girlfriend. He eyed Drake from time to time, and his hands shook, his spoon clanging against his pale blue bowl with an irregular beat. There was something here, he said. Yawning, the unconcerned girl said that

whatever it was, it was gone now. My brother was never convinced. Our parents returned two days later.

He never told them what had occurred in their absence.

*

A good ghost story cannot follow a traditional narrative. The supernatural never invades our lives neatly. Instead, it appears at random, and leaves when it pleases—if it ever leaves at all. Never trust a ghost story with a Jane Austen ending. No one lives happily ever after. No conclusion is reached. There is no epilogue where we find the apparition happily married with children. Ghost stories resist easy answers, dénouements, The Ends. They're those slumber parties when you couldn't account for what the Ouija board said. They're those afternoons when you could swear you heard someone enter the house, only to find you're alone. They're the moments just before you fall asleep, when you start at the sound of something calling your name. They're the unaccountable noise, the queer behavior of a beloved family pet, the loss of an object that appears years later.

A good ghost story never teaches a lesson. Like fairy tales, ghost stories are in our bones. We hear both from the cradle to the grave; we memorize them and repeat them to children and grandchildren, write them down for future generations, anthologize them. But fairy tales were once meant to instruct. A good ghost story does no such thing. It can only convince us, for a moment, that

we know absolutely nothing of this world or the next. This is the lesson such tales have to teach us: the crushing weight of our own ignorance.

If someone tries to tell you a ghost story with a moral or a message, they're either trying to convert you to their religion or running for public office.

*

My brother has told this story several times, often in the company of good friends, and copious amounts of cheap wine. It changes in the telling. If he's with his friends he makes himself seem braver. If he's with a woman, he makes himself seem more vulnerable, and makes our mature German shepherd a helpless pup. But the version that rings truest is the one I'm about to tell you, the one he whispered to his senior prom date, the girl he promised he'd marry someday, the one who died two weeks after graduation when a drunk driver smashed his three-ton truck into the fragile frame of her bright green bicycle.

My brother was home alone one afternoon, doing homework on the couch, when he heard a thumping noise emanating from our kitchen. He paused, thinking that perhaps the sound would stop, thinking that it was just the old dishwasher acting up, or perhaps the fridge groaning in feeble protest. But the sound kept up, and my brother decided he ought to see what its source was. We'd had birds in walls before. Once, there'd even been a family of raccoons who had found their way into the walls. Thinking that these interlopers may have returned, my brother climbed onto our kitchen counter, and began

rummaging through the cupboards where the sound seemed to be coming from. Perhaps whatever animal it was had found a way into our cereal, or spices.

After digging through several cupboards, my brother accidentally overturned an open bag of cat food onto the recently mopped floor. Muttering an impressive string of expletives, he climbed down from his perch and finger-swept the kibble into a small pile. As he began to transfer it to a bowl in his cupped hands, he heard the noise again, this time from somewhere beneath his feet.

My brother scanned the floor, but saw nothing. There was a frozen pipe, he thought, or maybe a squirrel had found its way into our basement. He ran a hand over the worn linoleum, trying to ascertain the thump's origin. And then the noises began.

They started in a cupboard, or at least my brother thought they had. He opened each and every one, searching for the source of the scritch and the cackle. A part of him was sure an animal had gotten in somewhere, but another part of him, a far larger part of him, was convinced that something else was waiting, perhaps behind a door he would not be able to close once he had gone through the trouble of opening it. There were rumors about our kitchen. Our babysitters used to avoid it after we had gone to bed because town talk said that a man had found his wife fucking his best friend up against the fridge. He'd shot them both before putting a bullet in his own brainpan. Sometimes, when friends were over, my brother would show them the old ketchup stain on the counter, and tell them it was blood.

He didn't tell them about the cracked ceiling, the broken light fixture. He knew the origins of these particular imperfections, of course, but our parents had told him their story wasn't meant to be shared, and so he stuck to tales about ketchup stains and shattered human skulls.

But the stain on the counter that afternoon did not appear to be condiment-based. A dark liquid began to ooze from it, and over the off-white countertop and onto the floor. The sink retched black tar and my mother's olive green teakettle whistled without water. My brother, who'd never quite believed in the town talk until that afternoon, quit searching for the source of the earlier noises. He ran upstairs as though he were afraid the steps might collapse before he could reach the second floor, stopping only to scoop up the cat, who expressed her displeasure at being disturbed with a few, well-aimed swats.

Later, when our parents returned home from work, he joined them in the kitchen. There was no tar, no oozing stain, no noise beyond the dull whir of a neighbor mowing somewhere down the street. There was nothing particularly frightening about the reheated meatloaf our mother served, and when my father asked after the angry red scratches our cat had left on my brother's arms, my brother merely shrugged and mentioned a bad encounter he'd had with a berry bush while out hiking.

*

Telling ghost stories is just one of many life skills they don't teach you in grade school. It's a talent you pick up over time, through the careful study of others. Children learn how to behave at a funeral by mimicking the adults

around them—the downturned faces, the solemn handshakes, the bleak attire. We learn how to tell ghost stories in a similar fashion. Adults and older siblings spin yarns for us over campfires, frightening the tiniest kids with crooked fingers and distorted faces. We memorize the best stories, ape the scariest gestures, and work to perfect our witchy cackles, our ghoulish moans. We even seek to imitate the voices of our favorite storytellers, playing with pitch when the mood strikes us.

But our first forays into the world of ghost stories are rarely successful. Our early audiences are left yawning or laughing, and rarely, if ever, do they believe in the story we've crafted for them. These premature attempts lack polish and style, it's true, but what they really lack is an air of authenticity. A good ghost story has details only the teller could know—the placement of a specific cupboard or vase, the unique reaction of a loved one, an old family secret. A good ghost story is particular. It doesn't matter if the teller changes these particular details in later tellings. What details a teller chooses to include are irrelevant so long as the audience believes that only the storyteller could know such specifics. A good teller of ghost stories doesn't relate a story—they relive it.

*

My mother says that it was our old French bulldog Herman, and not Drake, who shared my brother's encounter in the kitchen. She tells her friends

that her son had been in the kitchen alone that night, but that everyone else had been just a couple of rooms away, watching television in the den.

Her friends nod knowingly. There had always been talk about our kitchen. Our grandfather, my father's father, had passed away at the kitchen table. His death had been quiet, perhaps even peaceful, but rumors persisted that my grandfather was not all that he had seemed. A veteran, some said he'd sold state secrets to Russia, or maybe Hitler. Others said that he had committed horrible crimes against humanity in Dresden---or was it Laos? There was never any conclusive evidence.

And if my mother's friends think of another family death, more recent and more grisly, they make no mention of it. Such deaths are not spoken of in good company.

So, my mother's friends cannot help but think of my morally ambiguous grandfather when my mother relays her tale. It was around nine, she says, and her son had gone in search of Herman's favorite toy—a soggy, soiled teddy bear that had lost all but one of its limbs. He'd been crouched under the dinner table when Herman began to growl and pull at his socks in a desperate attempt to drag him from the kitchen. My brother, annoyed, shoved him away, but upon standing, he too, had the sudden urge to flee. The cupboards were shaking, and the table rattled. Pots shook on their shelves and the floor felt uneven beneath my brother's feet, though it had always been scrupulously level. Carrying Herman underneath his arm like a misshapen football, my brother sprinted into the den.

My mother says that when she asked him what was wrong, he told her that Herman had behaved very strangely in the kitchen. My father said that maybe the old dog was sensing an earthquake or a storm or simply a deer lurking somewhere on our deck.

My mother says that Herman's never been bothered by deer before, but you never know. We do know that there wasn't a storm that night or an earthquake or even a frost. And my mother rarely mentions the scritching noises she'd occasionally hear for some time thereafter. She never speculated aloud on the cause, though she had her theories. Everyone had their theories.

*

A good ghost story stays true no matter how much you change it. My brother could've been my mother or my father. Our dog could've been a cat, or it could've been a parakeet. It could've been morning, afternoon, night, Halloween, Flag Day. The only elements that cannot change are the location and the ghost itself. The ghost must remain as it was, for no ghost is like any other. Its setting is essential, because the dead cannot be separated from the space they haunt. You cannot move a ghost from Gettysburg to Waterloo. A ghost living in the attic can never take the place of one lurking in a basement. But as long as you possess the story of a ghost, you possess the story of its home.

The rest of the tale is just window dressing: brothers and bulldogs, twilight and dawn.

*

This story is true. I know it is, because it happened to my mother. She was the one in the kitchen that night. My brother was on a school trip. My father was asleep upstairs. My mother had consumed coffee too close to bed and was unable to sleep.

I had yet to begin to write. I didn't know how to tell a good ghost story.

My mother went to the kitchen to get our German shepherd a treat. She didn't turn the light on, depending on touch to lead her to the correct drawer. She selected a biscuit and let the dog lap it from her hand. My mother stood for a moment, admiring the moon through the window and listening to the sound of contented doggy crunching. When the chewing stopped, she meant to return to the book she had left in the living room, but the shepherd refused to let her pass. The hair along his spine was raised and touched with silver moonlight. I imagined she could feel his low growl in her sternum, feel it vibrate the tile beneath her bare feet. A hand on his head would not quiet him, but she didn't have the heart to scold him for his bad behavior, because she, too, wanted to growl, wanted to lash out at whatever mournful thing had crept into the kitchen. Something was there, something wrong, something that made her want to run away as quickly as she could, and she would've if the dog hadn't herded her into a corner. I wonder if it was the first time she truly understood evolution, understood the animal beneath her skin, a primate who was pondering the merits of throwing itself out the nearest window. She would've have gladly trod through broken glass if it meant escaping whatever had invaded her home.

But what frightened her so? Nothing more than her name, which appeared across the frosty window above the stove in somehow familiar script. She could hear the scratch of nails on glass, hear the slight squeak of skin against the wet, smooth surface. There was something there, something that knew her name, and she thought she might know its.

Some stories don't get written in history books. Some don't become tall tales or urban legends. Some stories are never spoken aloud. Some stories are kept in the family.

Like the story of a girl who hung herself from the kitchen light fixture, a story no one was paying much attention to until the young woman took the climax into her own hands.

When the initial panic began to fade and her name slowly faded back to frost, my mother ran upstairs to my parents' room. She woke my father and told him about the noise; he said it must've been mice. She told him about the dog's strange reaction; he said he must've smelled an animal outside.

She didn't tell him about her name, written in curling letters across the frosty pane.

My mother was unconvinced by my father's arguments, but when she walked back downstairs, she found the dog asleep by the stove. Tearing through the cupboards, she found nothing that could disprove my father's theories, though she has yet to see a mouse in that kitchen.

*

Ghost stories always evolve. In fact, they ought to. Why waste a good story by keeping it static? Why not tell it every year rather than just once? If a teller changes the story, they can always tell it again, can even scare the same people on multiple occasions if they're cautious. That's how classics come about—the kind of stories that get passed down from father to son, or sister to brother. Some say that classics are classic because they remain the same, but they are wrong. Classics are classics because they can change.

But what changes in a good ghost story? It changes in every telling, certainly. A bulldog becomes a tabby. A brother becomes a mother. Night turns to day. As long as the ghost and its location are consistent, the speaker can change any of the other elements without damaging the story at hand. Keep the speaker, the ghost, the kitchen, and the story can never go astray, no matter how many times you retell it.

So, yes, change the little details. Embellish characters. Add a little local color. Don't preach. Don't be didactic. An audience may be frightened when a tale is shared, but they'll recover. They will not be haunted by the story they have been told. They will not be changed in some profound way. They will not donate to charities in the ghost's name. The teller's only reward will be the goosebumps you raise, the collective shudders they witness, the nervous shift of wide eyes in stretched sockets. Minor rewards, perhaps, but there's a kind of power to be found in the raising of hair and the racing of hearts. Tell a good ghost story, and people will notice. Trust me.

Change a story's details if you wish, for they're the only things one can change. Good ghost stories never change the ghost. They can only change the

speaker. Each retelling brings the storyteller closer to controlling the tale they tell—or so they might hope. Haunted by the events they have witnessed, they believe they can tame the supernatural with their story. With every tale retold, a tiny bit of fear is exorcised. If they can tell it enough, the ghost will become just another fairy tale, a story recalled over coffee on sunny, innocuous afternoons. It becomes a story children tell over s'mores and smoke, gathered about a fire, their silly little ghost stories rarely more than cries for attention, pleas for their peers to take notice of them.

*

One early morning, my father went into the kitchen to make himself a pot of coffee. He stood in his robe, scratching his belly, and watching the birds gather at the feeder outside the kitchen's bay window. The birds took little notice of him. It was early January, and most of our yard's feathered inhabitants were in dire need of the nutritious seed blend my parents so lovingly provided. After pouring himself a steaming mug, my father settled in at the table with the paper, reveling in the silence of a slumbering house. Absorbed in his reading, he did not notice when the silence was disturbed by a light scritching noise, not unlike the sound of a pencil scrawling across an empty page. It was only when he raised his head to glance at the feeder again that he noticed something was awry. The chickadees had fled, and the cardinals and jays had hopped from the feeder to a nearby branch. They huddled together, a sight that disturbed my

father, for he had never seen a jay cozy up with a cardinal. He had never seen a jay cozy up with anyone.

Unmindful of my father's gaze, they buried their blue heads under red wings.

The feeder was now empty but for a starling who had perched on the side closest to my father. Rather than picking out the sunflower seeds from amongst the sea of cracked corn, the black bird sat unmoving. My father swore it was looking him in the eye, but he laughed it off. Some trick of the early morning light, surely. And the lone starling wasn't such an unusual sight. Starlings usually rule the roost. They're big bullies, after all. Content with this reading of the situation, my father turned back to his paper.

But his paper was no longer legible. Letters had been hacked into every page. Some appeared to have been torn, while other were poked into being through the use of a sharp tool. A pencil, or a toothpick, maybe. And still other letters looked to have been inscribed with a bread knife, their edges shredded and hazy. Pieces of newsprint fell on my father's lap and clung to the curling black hair that poked through the low collar of his robe. Days later, he would find paper in his pockets and clinging to his terrycloth sleeves. My mother, however, would find no scraps on the kitchen floor. My brother would find no pieces of yesterday's news left in his chair.

But it was not so much the starling or the letters that shook my father, but what the letters said. They spelled a familiar name, though later he would tell himself that he had been mistaken. He told my mother that what he witnessed that winter morning had obviously been the product of a sleep-deprived mind,

or perhaps a hallucination brought on by too much caffeine. For as soon as he recognized the name, it disappeared. The newspaper looked a bit more rumpled than it had when he had picked it up off the porch but was otherwise whole. When he turned back to the feeder, the starling was gone, and a pair of finches had taken the bird's place. His heart rate slowed as he watched them greedily pick peanuts from the tray.

My father will tell you this story isn't true. But he's wrong. He doesn't it want it to be true, but it is. I know it is, because I was there.

Later that day, when my father was refilling the feeder, he found the starling dead on the frozen ground. He never told anyone. He never even mentioned it to my mother. But I know what he saw.

*

A good ghost story must appear true. The audience will want to believe in your grandmother's haunted basement, or in the ghost that lives in your oven. A good ghost story conjures a ghost into being in much the same way a magician coaxes a rabbit out of a hat. Like the magician's crowd, the storyteller's audience is skeptical. But it's important to remember that the audience wants to believe, wants to see the impossible occur before their untrained eyes. A skilled storyteller can make magic, and unlike the magician, a good ghost story requires no props. A good ghost story must simply resemble a truth, of sorts.

Strive to tell good ghost stories, but do not seek to tell great ones, for the great ghost stories are true. They take more time to learn to tell than you will ever have. They require truths you cannot know, and crowds you cannot draw.

Great ghost stories demand attention. Great ghost stories demand blood. Great ghost stories don't entertain, but preserve. Unlike a good ghost story, told in good company and good fun, one must take responsibility for a great ghost story. One must always sign one's name upon paper, or upon the windowpane. Living audiences do not want great ghost stories. Only the dead long for such veracity.

Do not concern yourself with great ghost stories.

They're in good hands.

The Fourth Wife

I.

Bluebeard's fourth wife is a phoenix caught on safari. With clipped wings and new skin, she is smuggled across the border by train, a tightly curled captive in a fire-retardant suitcase. She steals her husband's keys before he can find a suitable moment to offer them. When he discovers her in the chamber, she lifts her eyes to his, her gaze already blank and black behind a stringy wall of red hair.

The first time she burns quickly, and he records the hour of her exit in a leather-bound book. He tallies each of her tiny deaths in red ink on pages scorched with the violence of her leaving. She takes longer to die than the others, but die she finally does. He leaves her remains where they fall. When the light begins to fail, he returns, and studies the little black pile, the charred brick floor. He notes the date and time of her final demise with considerable disappointment. The ashes are measured and poured into a beaker. Bluebeard leaves them on a shelf, and goes in search of mead.

The black particles shine like mica in the setting sun.

The chateau burns far too quickly for any of the townspeople to do much about it. The firefighters come to contain the blaze. Others come to watch it

burn. No one speaks of survivors. When they comb the wreckage for valuables, they will find little that hasn't been turned to ash.

All they will find is a ring of gold keys.

II.

Bluebeard's fourth wife cannot speak. He leads his young bride through the chateau, and for once does not linger in the parlor, making small talk over the tea set that had been such a favorite of his third. Instead, he escorts her to a bedchamber full of songbirds, their tunes turning shrill at the sound of heavy boots trodding the floorboards, their flapping wings clenching and unfolding like so many pairs of anxious hands.

Her hands are quiet when she removes her shift.

When he leaves three days later, Bluebeard places the keys in her hands, and recites the instructions he has spoken thrice before. If his words sound practiced, only the birds can compare it to performances past. The fourth wife does not speak when he takes his leave. She never does. Or, if she does, the master never writes this in his book. Her pages lay blank but for a small collection of feathers in which each specimen is neatly classified by species and gender.

Later, when the sun has bathed the bedchamber in vermillion, the fourth wife sets the birds free, cupping her hands around the stout bodies of blood-breasted robins, orioles in garments of black and gold, petite green tanagers with beaks of carmine, glossy yellow canaries, warblers, wrens, larks too long captive, who batter themselves against the walls until their mute host takes pity and

guides them to an open window. Several members of the flock refuse to leave. A magpie roosts high on an antique wardrobe, its head hidden behind one black wing.

The chateau is silent when the fourth wife takes the keys and opens every door, closet, and window to the evening air. Her bare feet echo down the corridors, the slap of skin on wood stark in the quiet kingdom. When she opens the final door, she screams—a lone, high wail.

Her sisters stir. The dead surround her, voicelessly, their limbs a luminescent green in the bloody chamber. The third wife has no eyes. The first wife has no tongue. The fourth wife leads them from their prison, her hands quiet on their slit wrists, their ragged nails. Silent, she leads them to tea. Silent, they sip through grey lips. Silent, they wait for his return.

III.

Bluebeard's fourth wife is strangely absent from his notes. She is fair and fine and when he finds her in the chamber, she turns to him, sharp teeth dripping.

She smiles.

IV.

Bluebeard's fourth wife does not die. When he returns to the chamber, her body is gone. There is only the ring, an heirloom given to the bride by her grieving mother. He picks it up, and rubs the gore from its gold band. He can see his smile in its green stone.

Fastidiously, he takes down the book, writes "Success!" in curling letters, and sketches the ring in quick, scarlet strokes. The book is left open to dry, the ring placed around his smallest finger.

He does not see the fourth wife for some time. When the day comes to find a fifth, he takes a razor to his beard. Workmanlike, he hacks away the blue hair. When he is finished, he steps back to admire his appearance. There is a woman in his looking glass. Startled, his shaking hand drops the razor. A knuckle is nicked. Blood pools.

When he studies the mirror, he can see nothing but his pale visage. He runs an unsteady hand over the silver surface, and laughs at his delusions. Reaching for a towel to wipe the blood away, he catches sight of a woman's face staring at him from a single drop of scarlet upon the bone-white basin. He flees, the sound of his heavy boots fading down the stairwell.

The fourth wife smiles from the looking glass.

At first, she only appears to him in mirrors. He shatters every one in his possession, throwing their remains to the sea. But in their absence, he begins to catch glimpses of her grin in the windows. When he hires someone to cover each and every pane with brick, the people in town speak about him in low murmurs. When he sells his wine glasses to an old woman down the way, the murmurs turn to talk. And still, he sells the family silver to a traveling salesman.

He sees her in silver door fixtures, in viscous puddles of soap, droplets of water left behind in the bath. She peers at him from row upon row of test tubes, winking at him until he can longer stand to be in his laboratory alone. When he tries to shatter the ring, she grins mockingly up at him, his hammer doing her

cheery nature no harm. He throws the ring in the fire, and pours a drink. When her face arises, wavering, from the depths of his scotch on the rocks, he sobs. She dances from tear to tear, and frolics in the melting ice.

No mention of this is made when the house is put on the market. They will remove the bricks from every window. They will wipe the blood from the floor. They will hang a new looking glass in every washroom, and speak admiringly of the seaside location.

It never sells.

V.

Bluebeard's fourth wife doesn't exist. He thinks he has found her one sunny afternoon, when he appears on the doorstep of an apartment complex carrying a MISSING poster and an obese tabby. His knock is confident, his beard little more than a blue shadow.

A woman in her robe answers the door. Toilet paper is wedged between her toes, her nails recently painted a lurid shade of red. He smiles and holds the cat out for inspection.

"Charlie!"

"Hello, miss. I believe I have something that belongs to you?"

He places the cat within her arms. She holds the heavy tabby close, but its emerald eyes stay pinned on its former captor.

"I can't thank you enough. Where did you find him?"

"Oh, I live in the area. He was sitting on my porch, yowling. For food, I expect."

The woman laughed. "Sounds like Fitch. Thanks for bringing him back."

"It was no trouble."

He smiles at her. The woman smiles back.

"Do you mind if I come in for a moment?"

The woman laughs then, the cat at her chest purring like a chainsaw.

"No, I don't think so."

She shuts the door before he can blink. He hears the clink of the deadbolt, the shuffling of her feet back through the kitchen. He is not yet ready to declare his results inconclusive. His heavy hand beats against the door, but the woman does not return. Sirens sound in the distance. Green eyes follow him from behind the safety of glass.

VI.

Bluebeard's fourth wife doesn't exist, so he finds a strip club downtown and tries to drown his sorrows in a bucket of scotch. He calculates that it will take approximately three hours to reach a satisfactory level of intoxication. Upon reaching this desired state, he pays for a lap-dance from a young girl with short blonde hair and a shimmery green slip of a dress that makes her look both younger and older than the type of woman Bluebeard generally prefers. But when the night ends he reaches for her all the same, and places one massive palm across her mouth. He doesn't see the lanky security guard headed his way, and fails to duck the fist she aims directly at his crooked nose.

"I'll have you fired," he mutters, the blood from his left nostril running red and bright through his silky beard.

"Doubtful. Keep your ass away from my girlfriend," says the security guard. The girl in green is tucked against her side, her face flushed with anger.

Bluebeard groans and lays his head down on the concrete. The floor is cool against his swelling face, and he estimates that he has at least five minutes before the club will find someone capable of moving his prone form. He closes his eyes against the club's flashing lights and waits.

VII.

Bluebeard's fourth wife isn't there to bail him out of prison. He paces the holding cell, and insists to the men on desk duty that she'll come.

"She always comes," he yells, but the men in charge pay him no mind. They are used to ravings of the delusional.

Bluebeard walks his square of cement until a hangover begins to pulse between his eyes. Lying down, he counts the bars in groups of four, and finds that he always ends one bar shy of his goal. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, eight. One, two, three, twelve.

One, two, three.

Patience

Not once upon a time, but twice, thrice, many once upon a times, there was a girl. It's always a girl, after all—some beautiful, Daddy's little princess type who's fallen in love with books instead of boys. Books won't love you and leave you. Books won't misinterpret the meaning of "no." Books won't leave you crying and ruined, won't leave a bleeding, bruised woman for dead in some rainy alleyway in Queens.

No. Books are steady. Reliable. The hero is always gallant, the girl always gorgeous, and the ending always happily ever after. Books are *safe*.

Or so I used to believe.

*

I think Lily used to believe that, too. She lives with me now. She keeps to herself, more or less, but it doesn't matter. Everyone here knows most of her story. Like all of ours, it's got its share of magic and intrigue. And books, books to fill shelves for miles. Leather-bound beauties with supple covers made to be

stroked and held before a roaring fire. Frail volumes worn thin from age and careless handling, their pages more delicate than the finest Venetian glass. Yellowed paperbacks, heady with must…but sorry, you're not here to share in my bibliophilia, are you? You're here to hear about Lily, our little book-loving beauty.

And a beast of sorts, I suppose.

*

Once she was a young teenager, a petite brunette with her mother's doe eyes. She was studious, perhaps even a bit overly bookish (if we're being honest here), and her father's unrepentant favorite (as so many of us were).

Her mother left when she was thirteen. She ran away with one of those leave-you-in-the-alley guys, and left her husband with two daughters from a prior entanglement, and one preteen who was his entirely. Lily's two older sisters had never taken a liking to Gerald, and had no qualms about taking the jewelry and savings bonds their mom had bequeathed them, and leaving their youngest sister in the loving hands of her hapless father.

A year after they fled, Lily got a card from them postmarked Vegas. Lily preferred to believe that they were out there working with the Vegas crime team, under the command of some eccentric who kept a collection of rare beetles in his bathroom. She shared this TV fantasy with her father, who never did anything to dissuade it. Not wanting to destroy his daughter's dream, he neglected to bring up the scantily dressed dancers that graced the postcard's face. It was

better to let the girl believe her sisters were solving crimes rather than committing them.

Lily's mother had laid out her jewelry on the kitchen table the night before she fled, anxious to leave her daughters with some token of her love. Or, perhaps she merely left too quickly to pack. In any case, she left something for her youngest daughter, as well. Knowing Lily was rather literarily inclined, she'd left her a hardback copy of something called *The Power of YOU!,* which she had picked up from an airport gift shop some years prior

Lily didn't consider the absence of her mother to be any great loss.

*

And so Lily and her father lived quite contently in their Brooklyn apartment for several years, but their happy ending didn't stick. Her father was from an older generation of librarians, a generation who had trouble handling word processors, much less the new computerized system that kept the New York City Public Library's flagship building running smoothly. And so, Gerald received a pink slip from a younger coworker who claimed he was "incompatible" with the library's new direction.

Our young heroine came home from school to find her father three sheets to the wind, sitting on the floor of their den, surrounded by a cadre of empty bottles.

"Dad, what's wrong? Did we get another letter from Mom?" said Lily, gripping her father's shoulders in a vain attempt to focus his glazed eyes upon her.

"I got you a present," he said, stumbling to his feet.

He slouched over to the couch, and grabbed a book from where it had fallen between the cushions. It was old, older than any of the books Lily regularly picked up from library discard boxes, and bound in sleek, black leather. The front and back covers, as well as the spine, had been carved with what might've been words (though they weren't in any language our protagonist would've have understood, no matter how well-read she was) that had been worn smooth and undecipherable. Lily took the book gingerly from her father's unsteady grasp, afraid that its yellow-edged pages would fall out in her hands, and opened it. The pages were blank.

"Dad, you didn't, uh, steal this, did you?"

Lily's father blinked blearily up at her.

"I mean, you didn't take this from the library, did you?"

Lily felt bizarre asking a librarian if he'd stolen one of his charges. It was like asking a father if he'd kidnapped his own child. But just as she knew that the latter scenario was entirely possible, she was sure that the book she was holding had been brought home with no record of being borrowed.

"You don't like it?" her father said, in a tone that made his daughter's eyes burn.

"No, no, Dad, it's great. Really," said Lily.

"Oh, good! By the way, Daddy's not going to work at the uh…that…place where the books live, anymore."

"Library?"

"Yes, that's what I said."

"Dad, did they fire you?"

"The proper term is let go."

"Ah," said Lily, feeling panic set in. Her income from the record store wouldn't pay for food, much less the college tuition she hoped to need next year.

"I showed them," said Gerald, stretching himself to sleep on the carpet. "I'm taking that book far away from the likes of…those t-readers!"

"E-readers. They're called e-readers, Dad."

"Bastards!" he declared and passed out.

Lily sighed.

*

Later, after she had tucked her father in and taken refuge in her own tiny room, Lily pondered their financial predicament. She could come to no satisfactory conclusions, as librarians have the misfortune of being rather limited in career options outside of, well, libraries. So, she instead turned her mind to the book her father had stolen. She'd have to return it tomorrow. She placed it on her nightstand, and fell asleep to the whirring of car wheels, catcalls, and the occasional anxious honk–the ever-present music of her city fighting slumber.

However, our dear Lily didn't sleep soundly that evening. She tossed. She turned. But mostly, she dreamed. She dreamed of stone animals, silent guardians made from granite and gold. She saw leonine figures with unblinking stares and manes almost entirely worn away by wind or rain. A stone lion in Switzerland mourns a comrade lost centuries before. Another, this time in Rome, licks its massive granite paws. A doglike lion, bronze going green, sits on huge haunches in a hilltop Chinese village, guarding secrets long gone. There are others: Chicago, London, Paris, and in Egypt, what rough beast is moving its slow thighs?

Lily woke to the sound of a falling trashcan, her heart beating a wild rhythm in her throat, her hand gripping the black, blank book.

*

Lily's father was still passed out the next morning when she reached the New York Public Library, stolen book in hand. She paused halfway up the massive steps, taking in the building's famous residents, Patience and Fortitude. To Lily's relief, the two marble lions stood stoic and still, just as they always had. She watched a group of Japanese tourists climb over and crowd around Fortitude, their cameras clicking away. Smiling, she walked up to Patience, and rubbed one of his paws for good luck, a habit her father had passed on to her when she had still participated in "Take Your Daughter to Work Day." The stone soothed her sweaty palm, the marble inexplicably cool for early summer.

Giving Patience's paw a final pat, she left the bustling sounds of Fifth Avenue behind her and entered the far quieter confines of the library.

Once inside, Lily thought about merely slipping the book into a return slot, but found that she wasn't quite willing to part with it. Staring around at the bustling librarians and the hunched forms of students, she felt a petty urge take hold of her. Maybe her father had the right idea. This library owed her something, owed him something. How many years had he worked here without a raise? How many hot afternoons had he spent trapped among the stacks? How many children had he read to, his tone changing, rising ever so slightly higher when he read the female characters, and dipping lower for every evil doer? Why not just keep the book?

Hell, why not steal a couple more?

Lily had been raised to believe that those who stole library books went to the circle of hell reserved for rapists and people who didn't know the difference between they're, their, and there. There was an illicit thrill to be found in plundering this well of knowledge before it was all scanned into computers and tossed aside. She felt a shiver run up her spine despite the heat, and grinned.

I was there that day. It was the not the first time I had caught sight of her; she was a repeat customer. I watched as she walked among the stacks, pulling down worn-soft paperback editions of Austen and the Bronte sisters, watched her sneak an illustrated collection of Rosetti from its designated slot, watched her find the children's section and cautiously slip each childhood favorite into her messenger bag. Later, she sat in front of a stack free from people, near me, and gently peeled the barcodes off of her spoils.

It looked to be an arduous task, and Lily soon fell asleep, lulled to dreams by the heavy, humid air and the quiet rustlings of the building around her. Hidden behind a wide shelf, she slept until after the library was locked and barred for the night. She woke to darkness, broken only by the lights outside and the moon pouring in the window.

She rose and walked around the nearest stack to loosen her stiffened joints. Stretching, she stared through a gap in the books and came face to face with a pair of giant, pale eyes.

Some among us say she screamed, but I can tell you that Lily the Brave barely let out a peep. Instead, she backed into a stack and stumbled, her limbs a jumble on the floor. The possessor of the eyes in question strolled into view.

It was a lion, as pale as the moonlight that bathed it. The beast lifted its massive head, and sniffed the air. It yawned. It swished its tail. It moved like water, but looked like stone.

Lily, however, couldn't move. She sat, frozen to the floor.

The lion sauntered gently over to her, its mane moving over its huge haunches with a sound like the raspy turning of pages. She could see its teeth; they were cracked and yellowed. She thought they'd be the last thing she'd see, but instead the lion merely walked past her to the pile of stolen goods. Dropping his nose to the stash, it rifled gently through them until it found the black book that had started the distraught girl's stealing spree. He picked it up between his teeth and walked back to Lily, holding his prize gently between sharp canines. She looked straight into those unblinking orbs, and suddenly felt a jolt of recognition.

"*Patience?*"

Later, when she awoke in the morning to a young man shaking her shoulder, she'd think it was a dream, in the same way we all did. But the absence of the black book from her bag would say otherwise.

*

Lily didn't make it home that day. Her cell phone buzzed like a hornet on her way to the station, and she paused to listen to the voicemails that had gone neglected in her evening away. She wondered how much her father had worried over her.

It turned out not much, poor thing. He'd thrown himself from the top of their apartment building the evening before. Perhaps he'd thought his final family member had left him for good. Perhaps he'd thought Lily would be better off with the money she'd gain from his life insurance policy. Perhaps he was simply too drunk to know what he was doing.

No matter the circumstances of Gerald's death, the end result was a voicemail from the police on Lily's phone, informing her that she ought to report to the police station at once, where a great aunt was waiting to take Lily back to her home upstate.

She'd need to identify her father's body before she could depart.

Shock compelled our heroine to return to the familiar edifice of the New York City Public Library, where she planted herself on Patience's giant paws and sobbed herself to sleep.

*

That night I watched Lily walk back into her father's favorite building, accompanied by Patience, his stony paws eerily silent on the hard floor. She let the lion guide her to the stacks she'd slept amongst the evening before, her hand buried firmly in his thick mane.

Well, perhaps it was a mane. It looked like a mane to the rest of us, but Patience appears in many forms. Lily might have believed she held the hand of a tiny, blonde child in a lacy, white confirmation gown. Or perhaps she was led amongst the aging books by a prince, his armor adorned with silver and polished steel.

Or maybe it was her father.

I don't know how Patience appeared to Lily, and I won't ask. It's not polite. She'll tell us in her own time. We always have time for stories.

Perhaps that's what the lion whispered to her when he pressed his muzzle to her ear, told her that she could turn back the pages and rewrite her own story. Maybe he convinced her she could craft a tale in which she wouldn't have to lose her city and her father in the same stroke. Go back in time and bring her sisters back. Tell a story in which her father won the lottery and she was able to attend NYU, and come home for dinner on Saturdays with Ma and Pa.

The beast can be very convincing.

His pitch must have worked with the grief-stricken Lily, for she allowed the lion to pierce her palm with one enormous claw. Holding her bleeding hand,

she waited while he fetched a familiar blank book and dropped it at her feet. She picked it up, letting it fall open in her outspread hands. The lion eyed her eagerly. Lily inhaled one last breath of the metallic night air and placed a bloody handprint on the book's first blank page.

A gasp and the thump of leather hitting the floor were the last sounds to disrupt the library's silence that evening.

*

Now, Lily sits on a shelf next to me, her slick black cover pressed against my rather tattered form. Hands rarely reach for either of us; the stories we hold are far too depressing for children, and far too incomplete for the older crowd to take an interest. The stockbroker who walked away from his cancer-ridden wife. The mother whose children were found dead in the bath. The girl whose father leapt from the 22nd floor.

The occasional teenager might take us down and carelessly thumb through our pages before laying us aside, but we don't mind being ignored. Some stories are best left untold. Instead, we sit snug and silent, patiently awaiting the beauty who will finally seduce the beast before he seduces her.

Lily thinks that our savior will come one night and bind the lion in his own book. That afterward, she will pull us down one by one and read our stories aloud. That her words might will us back to life.

I hope she's right. Our numbers continue to grow and Lily's only the latest addition to our anthology. Someday a princess may finally grant us our

happily ever afters, but until she arrives, there will always be new volumes to be found amongst the shelves—spines exposed, tales untold. Perhaps one day that special someone will speak their stories to the musty air and prove that all words are magic. Perhaps if we're patient enough, she'll come.

Wrestling with the Angel

Fall the First

It was three months, two days, and approximately four hours after the death of Elaine's husband, and the park she liked to walk her dog through was empty but for a naked figure on a snowdrift. Elaine would've passed it by if her greyhound, Mr. Pink, hadn't let loose a sad, high whine. She thought he'd come upon a dead deer or someone's campsite until she caught sight of a massive pair of wings. Wings that were apparently attached to a body. It lay on its side, a study in unnatural angles and crooked limbs. Crimson rivulets ran over white feathers, pooling on the snow below. Elaine crouched and reached a hand tentatively forward to touch skin marred by neither scar nor scab. Mr. Pink whimpered and nudged his cold nose against the naked stranger's hip. It did not respond to either of their ministrations, but lay still and un-shivering on the snowy ground. Elaine would've said it was dead, except for the way its wings would occasionally twitch in a manner not unlike Mr. Pink's paws when he was dreaming of the hunt. She placed a hand on its chest, hoping for a heartbeat and

finding nothing; it was like running a hand over a stone warmed by sunlight—solid and unresponsive.

Frowning, Elaine felt for a pulse and found her hand stayed. The stranger lifted its head and blinked. Eyes, paler than her snowy surroundings, met her own. Her surprised cry fogged the stranger's face with frozen air, and it dropped her arm to wave a hand through the vapor. Quizzical, the stranger cocked its head to the side as it watched the fog fade and reemerge from Elaine's parted lips.

"Are you alright? Can you stand?" she asked, glancing at his legs, only to turn her face away, flushed.

There was nothing to stare at. Just an expanse of smooth, snow-shined skin—a Ken doll with its neutered loins exposed.

The stranger took no notice of her words, but instead developed a keen interest in drawing indecipherable patterns in the snow. Mr. Pink licked its fingers while Elaine surveyed the damage. It didn't seem to have any injuries beyond the bloody wing. When she leaned in closer she could glimpse ragged bone, an ivory fork stuck fast in angry red flesh.

"Does anything else hurt? Did you hit your head?"

The stranger looked at her blankly and rubbed Mr. Pink's ears. There was something familiar in the slow movement of its hands, the graceful sweep of its fingers. Mr. Pink rarely took to strangers.

"Do I know you?" Elaine asked.

It raised its head and there was nothing familiar to be found in its marbled eyes, nothing warm in its pale features. Perhaps she had imagined it.

And yet.

"All right. Let's go home and get you warmed up."

Exodus

There was something off-putting about the sight of feathers on the faded fabric of her car's interior, not unlike the inexplicable panic felt after discovering a wild bird has made its way into one's home. She'd eased the stranger into the backseat, and had attempted to arrange the broken wing in such a way that might make the rough road out of the park a little less painful. There were no cries, no whimpers, as she tied the wing with her hand-knit scarf—just the inhuman gaze of opal eyes.

Now, sitting in her driveway, she wondered whether she ought to move the stranger or attempt to bind its wing before she did any more damage. Blood had soaked through her scarf, staining the seat. She idly thought about what method of attack she ought to employ on the rusting fabric. Bloodstains had never been her forte. The scarf, meanwhile, was a lost cause. Four hard months of swearing at incomprehensible patterns and threatening Mr. Pink with knitting needles every time he attempted to help, all down the drain. She should've used her socks.

"Keep an eye on him will you, Mr. Pink?"

The hound showed no signs of leaving his charge, so Elaine left the car running and headed for the house, in search of something to set the fracture. And a stiff drink. And also maybe her cell phone. Somewhere between the liquor and medicine cabinets, she found her phone wedged between two couch

cushions, a place she'd started thinking of as her office in light of life with a passive-aggressive greyhound. She dialed her great aunt, who listened to the morning's events silently but for the occasional "hmmmm" or "tsk."

"Well, what do you think?" said Elaine, fumbling beneath her bathroom sink.

"I think I'll come over and take a look at him myself."

Elaine hung up. It occurred to her that she didn't know how to set an arm, much less a wing. She did, however, know how to use a search engine. She typed, "How do I fix a man's broken wing?" in the blank bar and hit enter.

She returned to her car shortly thereafter, bandages and an easy-to-follow printout detailing the care of a broken seagull's wing in hand, and began dabbing gently at the lame wing with a wet cloth. Her patient paid her no mind, but continued to scratch the soft hair behind Mr. Pink's ears.

"He really likes you," said Elaine, unwinding a roll of gauze. "He's usually Mr. Antisocial. You sure you haven't met before?"

Her question hung in the air. She hadn't expected a response, not really. But some small part of her, some stupidly nostalgic, ridiculously miniscule part of her, really, had anticipated a smirk and shake of the head. There was no sound reason to expect such a reaction, and yet she couldn't help but place some strange hope solidly in those oddly familiar hands. If Mr. Pink could read some hidden truth in the stranger's palms, why shouldn't she?

"Lemme know if you want some painkillers or something," she said, packing the wound. "Is this making the pain worse, or did the snow numb it a bit?"

The stranger just stretched its good wing in response and shifted its gaze to the radio. Elaine reached across its prone form to turn up the volume. The bass blared, shaking loose a few stray feathers. Surprised, Elaine's new charge leaned forward to stroke a tentative hand along the thrumming speakers. And there was that familiarity again, that tinge of déjà vu, the ghost of a life lived twice.

"You like this song, eh? This was one of Michael's favorites, too. I haven't listened to it in forever."

If the stranger noticed the sharp change in her tone, it gave no sign. Elaine finished bandaging its wing without uttering another word. Whatever familiarity she'd found in this silent being was probably just her mind playing tricks in a vain attempt to put her at ease with the increasingly awkward event of having a naked stranger in her car. Like Mr. Pink, she'd never cared for strangers. Besides--strangers who fell from the sky probably already knew everything there was to know about her listening habits. And even if they didn't, it was unlikely they'd care.

The great aunt's ailing car grumbled up the snowy drive, and Elaine hurriedly tossed a blanket over the stranger. It looked almost normal under the wooly afghan, its wings half-hidden, its back hunched under the weight of wet fabric. If it weren't for its eyes. Though now that she looked again, they seemed more blue than opal. The old woman crunched her way to Elaine, and peered over her niece's shoulder, eyes narrowing.

"Well."

"What do you think?"

The great aunt eyed the stranger. The stranger eyed her back. She then reached forward and slowly ran her hands over its wings, her fingers pinching softly at each feather, as though she were keeping a running tally of down and cartilage. She held the stranger's chin in her gnarled hand and looked hard at its inscrutable eyes, ran fingers through its sun-gilt hair, and counted its teeth. Only then did she turn back to her niece and say, "Well, it's your problem now. I told you: think on something hard and long enough, and the world will have no choice but to give you something new to think on."

"What should I do with...it?"

"Feed it, clothe it, set it on fire–it certainly doesn't matter to me. You might be able to bring him around. I don't know. Time will tell, I suppose."

"It's not him, is it?"

"Goodness, no. And if I were you, I'd quit thinking about a thing like that. Though, honestly, if I were you, I'd have let this one freeze in the park. You'd probably be better off."

"So, he's…not an angel, then?" said Elaine, disappointed.

"What? Oh, well, no. Not yet, anyway."

"But he could be?"

"Hmmph. A man fell from the sky today. Who know other kinds of mischief you might wreak?"

Elaine felt like telling the woman that the only real mischief she could remember having been responsible for had occurred in her childhood, and that it had involved an innocent enough prank with a penguin from the local zoo. But the great aunt was the kind of woman who cared little for how you felt.

"He needs a name," Elaine said, looking the stranger in the eye.

"I'm sure you can think of at least one name that might work," said the great aunt with a scowl.

Elaine ignored her. "How about Sam? Or maybe Dylan? Do you like the sound of that? Dylan?"

"Call him Featherbrain and be done with it." "Listen, you can't just name someone, and call it a day."

"Spoken like a woman who let her husband name the dog."

"Exactly. I'll never forgive him for that. Naming's important."

"Alright, well, have it your way. I've got to go. My muffins for the church brunch certainly won't bake themselves."

The great aunt stalked back to her car with a half-hearted wave, started the vehicle and grumbled her way back down the drive. She stopped at the mailbox, however, and cranked her window down.

"Give him some soup for that wing. Nothing better for a broken anything than a bowl of good soup. Real soup. None of that canned business."

Elaine nodded, distracted by her charge's interest in the song blaring from her radio. Another Zeppelin track. She remembered the white slash of Icarus on a black album cover, and thought a Zeppelin reference would do as well as anything. Fitting, really.

"How about we call you Led? Would you like that?"

She took his silence for approval, and laughed at the way his brow furrowed as "Ramble On" gave way to a Bowie track.

"You're lucky. You could've been a Ziggy."

Cain and Abel

Led's first few days home were rough on Mr. Pink. It had been a long time since he'd had to compete for Elaine's attention, and he didn't take kindly to sharing his place on her couch with Led. Every time she offered Led a blanket or pillow, the jealous hound managed to steal the offering back and hide it. Led never put up a fight, but instead watched Mr. Pink methodically remove every gifted item.

Elaine unearthed Mr. Pink's hoard after hunting for a clean blanket for her guest to sleep with. She found her bedding, coated with dust and grime, wedged behind the fridge.

"Mr. Pink! Bad dog!" she yelled, but the culprit had long since fled the scene of the crime. He was probably off in the woods, floundering through the snow after something small and furry.

After putting the filthy mass in her washer, she went in search of a blanket for her guest, who Mr. Pink had left shivering in a pair of old sweats. Upending a box in her garage, she found an old throw and returned to the den.

"Here. It doesn't smell too musty. I think I washed it before putting it away. Think being the key word there."

Later, when Mr. Pink returned from the woods, he was disgruntled to discover his plans for household domination had been foiled. He didn't, however, remove Led's latest blanket. Instead, when Elaine checked in after a couple hours in the studio, she found the greyhound curled up next to Led, his furry head settled firmly in his former rival's lap. The winged man stared down

at the dog, unmoving, his eyes almost fond beneath their gold lashes.

"Glad to see we're all getting along. You decide to play nice, Mr. Pink?"

The dog ignored her, and buried his nose deeper into the worn throw Led has wrapped around his legs. Neither of them glanced her way. Elaine wondered what had brought about this new friendship, and then it came to her. Ah.

"It still smells like him, doesn't it, buddy?" She'd forgotten. The throw had been an old favorite of Michael's. She must have put it away after it happened. Of course she hadn't washed it.

Gently, she moved Mr. Pink over to make room for herself on the couch. She curled up on the opposite end from Led, her feet buried under Mr. Pink's warm bulk. Her hands wandered to the blanket, and she was tempted to tear it away from her guest. Instead, she ran her hand back and forth along its edge, her eyes never lifting from its worn form. If Led found her behavior strange, he did not show it. Instead, he merely ghosted his hands over the blanket in a similar motion, their hands occasionally grazing. Her skin buzzed. She watched the slow progress of their palms, and let the repetitive motion soothe her to sleep.

And if, after waking several hours later, Elaine felt a wave of disappointment when her sleepy eyes fell on Led's unfamiliar form, she did not show it.

Wandering in the Desert

Looking after Led reminded Elaine of the first month she had Mr. Pink. After years on the racetrack, her greyhound had needed to learn how to be a dog; Led needed to learn how to just *be*. It wasn't like watching an amnesiac, but rather like tending a toddler. Led didn't remember orange juice—he discovered it. And like a toddler, he needed constant surveillance. In her various foster homes, Elaine had looked after her fair share of younger clumsy kids. She'd thought she'd learned everything there was to know about troublesome toddlers, but her new charge certainly gave them a run for their money. Led had become a walking, wing-flapping disaster. No longer content with sitting in silence, rarely an hour went by when her new houseguest wasn't attempting to lick an electrical outlet or flooding the downstairs bathroom. He'd even managed to take several swigs of her best oil paints.

Elaine was happy she worked from home. A former boyfriend might've once told her that her resumé ought to read Professional Hermit rather than Graphic Designer, but her reclusive tendencies had made training Mr. Pink easier, and they were certainly useful now.

But unlike Mr. Pink, Led was a quick study. He learned how to walk, how to stretch, how to use knives, forks, a corkscrew. He learned that boxers were an everyday necessity, and that he ought to put his pants on one leg at a time. He could manage a microwave, and when he was feeling particularly adventurous, toast. He learned not only how to consume coffee, but that she liked hers with two creams and one sugar. He learned how to differentiate between her cell and the television remote and he knew that Mr. Pink preferred

his red ball to the blue one. He learned how to sleep and shower, how to sneeze and shiver.

He did not speak.

She was able to leave him for longer periods of time. She'd return from errands to find him lying on the floor with his nose pressed to Mr. Pink's, their eyes locked in a manner that suggested they were having the world's most enthralling telepathic conversation. Other times, she'd leave him standing in front of one of her paintings and find him in the very same position when she came back. She was glad someone found them fascinating. On the other hand, he never seemed to take much interest in the work she did on the computer. Then again, neither did she.

After a week in which he'd managed to successfully dress, feed, and bathe himself in a more or less consistent fashion, Elaine declared Led fit to spend an evening alone. She hadn't really longed to leave him to his own devices, but a couple of her friends had scheduled a blind date for her a couple of weeks before Led had come crashing into her life. She left cold pizza in the fridge and planted her accident-prone guest and Mr. Pink in front of some manner of crime procedural marathon.

Her date was late. He blamed it on the weather, but she had a hard time believing any Western New Yorker who claimed they had "difficulty" driving in the snow. Maybe he was a transplant. Or maybe he just drove like a senior citizen. His drink order made her think it was likely the latter. She wasn't sure what to make of men who felt comfortable enough in their masculinity to order

an appletini on the first date. But she shouldn't judge. After all, she had a half-naked stranger on her sofa.

"I think I've got a heavenly being on my couch," she said, between bites of surf and turf.

"Don't we all."

"Do we?"

"Sure."

"I'm worried about his wing. It doesn't seem to be healing. How long do you think a broken wing takes to heal? Weeks? Months?"

"How long would a bird's wing take to heal? It's probably a similar timeframe, right?"

"I'm telling you that there's a strange man on my couch."

"Are you sleeping with him?"

"What? No, I'm not sleeping with him. It's not like that."

"Oh. Well."

"Yes."

They blinked at each other.

"Do you wanna get the check?"

"Oh. Yeah. Wanna head back to my place?"

She didn't. She did, however, want to sit on her couch with a half-naked stranger. And so she brought the man to her house, largely because her mother was always telling her she'd have to move on someday, and a little bit because she wanted to see his reaction to Led.

But the man didn't have much to say on the manner. He'd plopped on the couch, and Led had barely blinked before turning back to the television.

"Hey, man," her date said. "Where do you know Elaine from?"

He didn't comment on Led's wings, or his silence–didn't seem to pay any attention to him at all, and Elaine wondered whether this said more about her than him.

"He's my…my second cousin," she said, lamely. "Twice removed. We go way back."

The thought made her wince, but considering how little notice Led took of her, they might as well be estranged relatives.

Elaine headed to the kitchen, stalling for time, though she couldn't be sure why she might need it. She was surprised in the act of putting ice into tumblers by a hand on her shoulder. Led looked at her, standing close enough for his uninjured wing to briefly graze her back through the thin cloth of her dress. He cocked his head, and for a moment, she thought he might finally speak, but instead he simply gazed, before padding back to his post on the couch. She briefly wondered if she imagined the entire event.

When Elaine returned to the den, her hands were empty, and she sent her date home with the excuse of a migraine and a promise to call, of course, very soon, yes.

Tower of Babel

Painting became difficult with someone continually looking over your shoulder. You can't lose yourself in another world when this one keeps nudging

at your side. And feathers have been known to fall in your paint. Elaine tried to encourage Led to talk about her painting, art, the weather, but he just blinked back at her, his gaze a blank canvas.

She tried teaching him to write. She tried to make him copy letters and numbers and the occasional helpful phrase, but he seemed uninterested. Bored, even. For kicks, she dug out her grandmother's Bible, thinking she ought to give him the chance to read something a little more up his alley. Or what she thought would be a winged man's alley. He skimmed through the tome like it was an obsolete phonebook, left the kitchen table, and commenced communing with Mr. Pink on her dining room rug. Well, so much for appealing to his spiritual side.

It happened by chance, as everything does. It began with a single drop of black ink upon an egg-white canvas.

"Goddamn it, Led!"

He seemed unrepentant, his good wing dripping paint on everything within his wingspan.

"If you like painting so much, why don't you give it a try? It might get you out of my hair for five seconds."

She gave him a brush. He held it but did not move.

"You've watched me do it enough, c'mon."

He did not move.

"Oh, *here*. Look, just paint your name. Like this."

She painted his name in wet, black script across the back of his hand.

"There? See. Easy," she said, blowing the letters dry.

"Led," he said.

"Huh?" she said.

"Led."

*

Green looks ugly against his skin. Yellow doesn't show. Gold looks good in sunlight. She tries every color in her studio, and then some. She buys henna and finger paint, gel pens and magic markers. Later, she will try her hand at calligraphy. Anything that writes on skin is fair game. They aren't picky. It's the words that matter.

She starts slow. She writes his name, again and again. She writes hello and goodbye, good night and good morning. She jots down grocery lists, phone numbers, and email addresses. His vocabulary grows with every scribbled to-do list. He learns how to count from the numbers scattered across his toes. He learns how to sing from the notes and lyrics she splashes across his clavicle. He learns how to laugh from terrible puns penned in hot pink across his pinky. He scans his skin like a dictionary, looking for the words she sometimes leaves for him in his sleep.

One morning, she catches him attempting to climb her stairs. Mr. Pink had a hard time with stairs when she first brought him home. He'd never encountered them in his past life. She had spent every night for weeks on end, patiently placing one paw in front of the other, until he had learned to ease his way up to the second floor. Watching Led awkwardly shuffle his way up to the

landing, she has a hard time envisioning herself repeating the same lesson with a creature of Led's size. It's just…undignified.

She calls him back. He takes the stairs on his rump, the way Michael used to do in college, when they'd both had too much to drink. She fails to muffle a snicker, and she thinks, perhaps, the look she receives in return might contain a trace of embarrassment. She fetches a permanent marker from the kitchen and takes his hand in hers. There she pens *stairs*, *steps*, and *railing*. She writes *to climb*, *to ascend*, *to go up*. She goes to grab a thesaurus and returns, writes *to mount*, *to rise*, *to scale*. Her hair touches his palm, and his wings twitch with the tickling.

"All right. Now, try it."

He takes them in leaps and bounds. She grins.

"Elaine?"

"Yeah?"

"I am unable to get down."

She laughs.

"Hold on."

The Plagues

They are working their way through adjectives when she sees them in the basement. She had been searching for some her favorite books from junior high, thinking that their less-varied vocabulary might be easier for Led to muddle through. Instead, she gets lost in a box of Michael's battered schoolbooks, their margins covered with his illegible scrawl; she'd told herself she'd donate them,

eventually, and had left them in the basement in hopes that she might one day work up the courage to sort through them. Leaving Led to ponder the myriad of differences between bitter and sweet over a cup of lukewarm tea, she sits cross-legged on the cold cement and flips through each and every text, her gaze lingering on every scribbled note and starred passage. She does not notice the fading daylight or the tingling in her sleeping feet. Only when the sun leaves her in darkness does she place the books, one by one, back into their box. She lugs them up the stairs, her chest heaving with more than exertion.

Elaine places the box on the kitchen counter, ignoring Led, who has given up staring at his cup of tea in favor of writing his name in large, capital letters on the back of supermarket flyers. He rises to greet her, his wings yellow in the superficial light. She turns her wet face to the wall and pushes him away; he searches his skin for answers neither of them has. Sobbing is beyond his realm of experience.

"I do not understand," he says.

"There's nothing to understand."

"I don' t know what this means."

"Neither do I, jackass."

She grabs a pen and scratches *death* into his arm. He tries to pull away, and she writes *pain*. She writes *suffering* along his spine and *suicide* where wing meets shoulder blade. She writes *hate*, *anger*, and *grief*, and he still doesn't understand. She writes *Heaven* on one cheek and *Hell* on the other and when he cries out, she adds a question mark to each. He tells her to stop and she pens

Michael across his forehead, the skin beneath the black letters raw with the force of her writing.

She throws the pen down and heads for the front door. Mr. Pink whines, and she turns to meet ink-stained eyes. They stand in the silence and neither of them is any closer to understanding. She pads back to him, writes *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,* until there is no more skin to apologize to.

She spends the next two days locked in her studio. She leaves him directions for warming dinner on a sheet of scrap paper.

*

Eventually, Elaine emerges from her studio and whistles for Mr. Pink. They return to her basement, leaving Led alone with the phone book. Led is nearly through the Ns when she comes into the den, bearing a heavy stack of boxes. She lets Led help her tear away the tape from the heaviest of the group, and remove its contents one by one.

"Books," he says. "All books."

"They were Michael's. He was a Great Books major. Well, for a couple semesters, anyway."

"Are some books superior to others?"

"Apparently. Only the brightest and the whitest. God bless Western civilization."

"If they displease you, why did you keep them?"

"They found them in a storage unit he'd rented. They were going to throw them out. I didn't know what else to do with them."

"Don't you read them?"

Elaine laughed.

"I suppose you do. Michael and I had very different tastes, though. I think the only book we ever agreed on was *Where the Wild Things Are*."

"May I read them?"

"Sure."

She spends February in her studio, with a sleeping dog at her feet and an impossible man reading dead white guys in her den. They have lunch together, and she writes particularly difficult passages out for him across the sensitive skin of his inner arms. She asks if he'd like to maybe try another book, perhaps give the Bible another go?

"I would prefer not to."

She thinks of Michael's volume of Milton, with the Biblical passages scattered throughout its footnotes highlighted in hot pink, and laughs.

"Guess I'm not the only one who doesn't take after their loved ones."

"I don't have loved ones," he says and leaves her to shiver in the cold kitchen.

Gabriel

It takes Led hours to power through an entire text, and he often switches books mid-chapter. Elaine watches him pick up novel after novel, only to discard them in favor of a new one five minutes later. His wings shudder with

restlessness. She fears the stress of his continual confinement is beginning to do more damage than good to his wound. She reaches a hand out to calm his tense shoulders, only to pull away when she feels new muscles twitch beneath her hand.

"I know you're bored, but all this pacing is just going to make matters worse."

The dark look she receives in thanks for her concern makes her sigh. She doesn't remember teaching him cynicism; he must have picked that up all on his own. It looks wrong on his increasingly familiar features.

"I'll try not to damage myself for your sake."

And was that sarcasm? My, my. Someone *had* been busy.

"You can take a look at my books if you're bored with Michael's."

She watches him peruse her shelves, his fingers sliding over the spines in quick succession. Michael had always looked at books with a kind of quiet reverence. To see this man run his hands roughly over her hardbacks made her chest ache.

When his hand comes to a rest, she wants to be surprised by his selection but isn't.

"Good choice. Michael never much cared for him."

"I'm not Michael."

She doesn't have anything to say to that.

*

He used to pad so softly about the house, she never heard him approach. Now, she can trace his footsteps by ear alone, locate him by the slap of bare feet on her wood floor. He doesn't alert her to his presence, but stands at attention somewhere just beyond her right shoulder. She makes no move to greet him, and so they sit that way for hours with nothing between them but the swish of brushes and the slow beating of wings. Michael used to watch her work, used to spend his weekends helping her prepare paints and move canvases. Led never comments on her paintings or offers to help. He just stands there, his no longer unreadable eyes tracing the trajectory of her brush hand.

She's always the first to cave.

"Can I help you?"

He hands her a stack of books. Garcia Marquez, Ovid, that stupid highlighted edition of Milton.

"This has happened before."

"What has?"

"Me. Men like me."

"If you believe the stories."

"The tales I have read never end satisfactorily."

"Maybe you should read better stories."

"I have to leave."

"You could stay. Just a little bit longer."

"Why? My leaving cannot undo his death."

"So why bother leaving?"

He doesn't have anything to say to that.

The Ten Commandments

One night in March, she plops down on the couch beside her charge, and says:

"I don't think your wing's ever going to heal, Led."

He's too involved in his book to respond.

"I'm sorry. I bet you miss flying."

"Call me Ishmael," he says, without looking up.

"Appropriate."

"I can fly."

"No, Led, I don't think you understand—"

"You do not wish me to leave, yet you know I cannot stay."

"What? No, I just don't think you're going to be able to."

"Because you do not wish it?"

"No, because your wing isn't healed."

"My wings are irrelevant. I could leave."

She wants to argue, but knows she cannot. Instead, she finds a gray magic marker and writes a list across his torso. *You shall not lie. You shall not use all the hot water in the shower. You shall not hurt yourself. You shall not drink the milk straight from the container. You shall not fly. You shall not enter my studio when I am not there. You shall not let things go too far. You shall not leave me to clean up the mess. You shall not die.*

When she writes *You shall not change*, they both know it's a order he cannot follow.

Joseph

Led spends his first few months wearing a pair of University at Buffalo sweatpants Elaine had found crammed in the back of a drawer. They belonged to one of her exes, a man who was apparently much larger than her houseguest. Wings were rather hard to accommodate and she hadn't wanted to wrestle the injured limb into anything too snug. Instead, she gave him a quilt, hiked up the heat, and called it a job well done.

In March, she turns down the heat, throws her quilts in the wash, and takes a pair of scissors to Michael's old Zeppelin tee shirt. She helps Led into the revised garment, careful not to push against his old injury or jar any of his pennaceous feathers. He smiles at her choice of apparel.

"Appropriate."

"I thought so."

He flaps for emphasis, watching the ragged feathers stretch the shirt's fabric in the mirror. No longer white and gold, their feathers have long since been stained with water and ink. The wings have acquired more colors than the puddle of oil stagnating in her driveway.

Mr. Pink takes time away from his busy schedule to sniff Led's new wardrobe. Led chuckles, and tosses one of the dog's more obnoxious toys, a tattered reindeer with bells, a Christmas cast-off Elaine could never find the heart to throw away. Mr. Pink grabs the toy, but does not return it, preferring to shake it to an early grave. The bells echo with every violent twitch of the hound's head.

"Every time a bell rings," Elaine says, trying to smile.

"I do not need these to leave."

"So you've said."

"I must leave soon."

"I know."

"Will it sadden you?"

"I don't know."

She thinks the answer might be written on his skin, but she's covered too much of it to tell.

Jacob

He sleeps on the couch. Elaine has a guest bedroom, but he's always preferred the den. He has a tendency to leave the TV on, so that she wakes up periodically some evenings to a Greek chorus of gunshots and infomericals. The stairs creak as she creeps down them, her feet sticky on the wood. Spring is coming. She wonders if Mr. Garcia Marquez is right, wonders whether sunlight will heal a broken wing.

She mutes the television. He doesn't wake, just shifts so that his face is bathed in the unnatural glow. She kneels by the couch, readjusts his blanket. She tries to ignore the scar near his nose that wasn't there a week ago. His hair isn't gold anymore, either, but a more natural shade of blonde, shot through with shades of brown and amber. It seems like just this morning he acquired a chipped tooth that shows when he laughs. She used to think she saw something she lost long ago in the stubble lining Led's jaw, but now. Now, she's not so certain.

Elaine refuses to linger on these new features, so unlike the ones she had hoped to find. When did he chip his tooth? When had his hair lost its curl? She doesn't remember writing any of that. Of course, she hasn't written much, lately. Just minor words here and there. Their effect is minimal. Led writes himself.

She lowers her head until her nose touches his, just as he used to do with Mr. Pink. His breath is hot against her chin.

"I don't believe in you."

He doesn't stir.

Elaine's almost to the stairs when she sees him sit up.

"I don't believe you," he says.

"I know."

Fall the Second

He tells her the next day that he's leaving. She doesn't try to stop him, just writes a bracelet of directions around his wrist.

When she walks down the stairs that night, he is still awake. His eyes, no longer opal but gray, flicker in the TV-light. There's a fire in them. She wonders if she put it there.

"Where will you go?"

"Everywhere."

"Ah."

They sit in silence. Somewhere, Mr. Pink whines in his sleep. He's never been good at change.

She reaches for him in the dark, fumbles, and pulls a feather loose.

"Sorry," she says.

"Use it," he says.

She leaves, returns with ink. She has known she would need it. Unscrewing the lid, she asks what she should write.

"The only thing that's left."

She signs her name, over and over again. Along his hairline, in the hollow of his back, the insoles of his feet. He follows her movements, tracing the letters, blowing them dry. Together they stain his skin with her.

And when she is done, she reaches for his wings and pulls him close, Ken doll no more. Feathers fall like snow. In the morning, he leaves, wingless and alone.

She watches him tentatively navigate her slippery steps, and finds nothing remarkable in the way his hand grips the railing. He pauses at the end of her drive to give Mr. Pink a farewell pat, but the dog refuses his entreaties entirely, preferring to escape into the warmth of the house. He leaves his former housemate standing lonely in the drive, his shoes ankle deep in mud. Michael would've lifted a hand in farewell.

Elaine does not wait to see what Led does.

Instead, she follows Mr. Pink into the house. There are projects to work on, friends to quit making excuses to. There's spring cleaning to be done.

The feathers on Elaine's floor look as though they've carried a wayward albatross through a hurricane only to be defeated by an oil spill. She bends over and fingers several before selecting the least damaged of the flight feathers from

a pile of brown down. Spinning the haggard object slowly between thumb and finger, she tries and fails to catch a glimpse of gold in the sea of dull gray. Sighing, she licks a finger and attempts, unsuccessfully, to smooth the broken barbs into some semblance of their former grace. When she pulls her finger back, it is stained with a season's worth of dust and ink. She doesn't succeed in making the feather flight-worthy, but her busy finger has stripped away a streak of grime to lay bare, here and there, a vein of white.

Grabbing a broom, she sweeps the feathers into a bowl, putting aside the down for some future date when perhaps she'll find the fluffy mess endearing, rather than daunting. After washing the larger feathers with dish soap and water, she grabs a can of petroleum jelly and smoothes each wayward barb. Mr. Pink intently watches her lay each feather on a towel that lies beside her on the couch, and it is only after she has cleaned each and every one that she allows the hound to lick the trails of dried salt from her face. She thinks Mr. Pink will probably take this opportunity to rob her of a few feathers, but days later, when she finally thinks to look behind the fridge, she finds nothing but dust and the occasional piece of dog food.

Later that afternoon, after they've dried, she takes a knife and carves each feather's tip with particular care. She'd never been good at working with mixed media, and her hands quickly become a collage of sliced skin and half-healed scabs. There's a sponge handy in case the blood stains the newly cleaned barbs, but every drop seems to slip from the feathers like water down a windowpane. It is almost evening when she finishes her task but the sun is setting later; there is still some light to see by. The clean feathers almost glow in the twilight; their

pristine white and gold shapes look stark against the worn couch. They appear as though they've been arranged to spell some word or phrase, but whatever they might be trying to say remains indecipherable to dog and woman alike. Elaine studies her handiwork a moment, before selecting the three finest specimens from her collection. Grabbing the inkwell she'd discarded earlier, she heads for her studio, feathers in hand.

The Ninth Circle

I can write no more. I have seen things which make all my writings like straw.

-St. Thomas Aquinas

It's pouring when you enter the pub. Soggy patrons mill about the bar, leaving pale fingerprints on empty pint glasses, while you swallow deep, black sips of beer and lick the foam from your upper lip. You have reveled in this rain, and pray for fog to follow. In the morning, you look forward to calling your mother and finally fulfilling her dreams of Dickensian London. After weeks of dry weather, you will speak of yellow smog that rubs its back upon the windowpanes, and locals walking the streets in wet wool. She will be glad that her daughter has finally experienced The Authentic England, and gladder still when you tell her that you've taken to leaving your work early to flirt with the bartender at the pub a block from your hotel.

She longs for grandchildren. You long for a distraction.

Of course, she might also remind you that there are more productive ways to while away an afternoon. After all, you could be spending more time in the library. The university has paid for this trip. Your "research" should take

priority. You ought to be writing. You should be trying to overshadow every horrible review from the last book with chapters that will astonish and amaze, passages that will change lives, sentences that will shake the universe. You could craft one perfect paragraph for every pissed off critic. You could. You will.

But it is too late to hit the books, so you sit at the bar and plan the postcards you will pen instead. Dear Liz. London looked like a scene straight out of Sherlock Holmes today. Dear Mike. I could barely find my way to the Tube through the fog this afternoon. Dear Jo. You'll be happy to hear it's been raining cats and dogs! Dear Mark. Dear Dad. Dear. Dear. You will create a 3x5 city for each of them. They will fall in love with a London, but not *the* London, a city you can't seem to get a hold on.

London is not New York, but sometimes, when walking in the grungy shadows of London's less historical landmarks, or strolling by modern skyscrapers, you can almost forget that your city is an ocean and several time zones away. The illusion inevitably fails, unfortunately, as soon as you hear someone speak. It is strange to continually hear one's language in unfamiliar accents. Your American English sounds clumsy in light of their posh London dialects, their slang awkward on your foreign tongue. People say it is easy for Americans to visit England because the two nations share a common language. You disagree. Sitting at the bar, surrounded by accents of every variety but your own, you feel like a toddler trying to communicate through shirt-tugs and two-word phrases.

"Another?" your bartender asks.

"Yes, thanks," you say, and cringe. Even this short answer betrays your origin, and you can't help but wonder if the bartender thinks more or less of you because of it.

Tonight, you wish you were Canadian. Surely, their accents are more intriguing?

"There you are, miss."

Do English men find French Canadian accents sexy?

You wait for your stout to settle, happy that while you have yet to acquire a taste for London, you have more than acquired a taste for its alcohol. You sip slowly, slurping foam and listening to the din. You try to pick dialects out from the sea of voices, a game you're slowly getting better at. Cockney. Birmingham. Mancunian. New York?

You glance down the bar and see a blond man in a black coat, his hands cupped around his pint as though it might warm his fingers.

"Great game last night, wasn't it?" he says to a hunched old man, who gestures half-heartedly in response. His accent is pure Yank. Game, he says, not match, and you find yourself imagining him at Yankee Stadium, feet up, cracking peanuts between sips of Miller Lite. You abadon your seat and weave your way through the crowd, his voice a magnet. You settle on an empty stool on the other side of him and wait for a pause in the conversation.

"You're not local, are you?" you say.

He smiles and you panic, convinced for a moment that you were mistaken, that his voice was merely a mirage conjured up by another homesick American.

"Neither are you."

But, no. His accent is your own, and you smile, hungry for its familiar sound. You have heard American tourists, but this man's voice is yours.

"Where are you from?" you ask. "Brooklyn?"

He laughs.

"New Jersey, I'm afraid."

"Close enough," you say, but it sounds more like a question.

He laughs again. You pretend his face is familiar, pretend you have always known the trying-too-hard way in which his dirty blonde hair falls into his hazel eyes. He talks and you listen, hanging on the slightly nasal lilt.

Later, the two of you take refuge in one of those little nooks that American bars have never quite gotten the hang of. You both talk less now, buzzed enough to cope with an occasional silence, and content with the presence of good company and good booze. Your knuckles brush, his hand warm against your own. You still ache for the sound of home.

"Tell me a story," you say.

"I thought I already had. You know where I went to school, what my relationship with my father is like—"

"No, no. A real story."

"A real one?"

"Yes. One that begins with once upon at time and ends with happily ever after."

"Ah." He winds a strand of your hair around a crooked finger, and lightly tugs your head closer to his. "A fairy tale, then."

Once upon a time, in a cold kingdom, there lived a cruel king with twelve daughters and a pregnant wife. In desperate need of a son, he prayed that his wife might finally produce an heir. But because this was his thirteenth child (and because everyone knows that a thirteenth child can cause nothing but grief), his prayers were not answered, and his poor wife gave birth to a girl with black hair and eyes like ice.

Afraid of what the king might do to her newborn baby, the woman placed the princess in a small boat and sent her out to sea. For many days, the child floated, fed by friendly gulls. She bobbed along on the backs of whales, and sometimes, a tern would take shelter in her boat's tiny prow. She sailed through cracking summer storms and schools of shining fish. She sailed through night and day and over the edge of the earth, until one day, her boat hit shore. There, curled in a bed of frost, she was found by a young woman.

"Like Clark Kent," you say.

"Or Moses."

"She's going to grow up and make King Misogynist let her people go, eh?"

He laughs.

"And they'll all climb onto her little boat, two by two…"

"Did you want a Bible story or a fairy tale?"

"Who says I can't have both?"

This tiny baby was powerful, though the woman who found her didn't know it. She thought the baby merely frostbit from her long journey, and so, wrapping the infant in cloth, she carried the girl back to her village in hopes of warming her up. The land the princess had reached was warmer both in people and in climate, but the frost was slow to fade from her tiny fingers and snowflakes stuck to her dark eyelashes.

The women of the village scrubbed the baby with warm water and rubbed her blue limbs with rags, but no one could brush the snow from her hair or the cold from her feet. The baby didn't seem to mind. Her cold condition did not trouble her, and as long as she was bounced on a knee or coddled in the crook of an arm, she was as happy a baby as you'd ever find.

But as she grew, the villagers began to whisper about the child from the North. Since her arrival, Summer had shortened its annual stay, and frigid Winter was far less eager to leave. The jungle lost its luster; its leaves curled, browned and fell with alarming speed. Monkeys sat huddled on low hanging branches, with their tiny hands buried in each other's ruffs for warmth. The jaguar shivered away his spots, and the toucan no longer sang to the tapir, for her beak was frozen shut. The villagers could no longer bathe in the river, and icicles hung from their houses like snake's teeth, crooked and dripping.

And still, the baby grew.

When the child had come of age, she turned every village boy's head with her ice-blue eyes and coal-black curls. But the older villagers' gazes were not so kind, for the past fifteen years had been filled with frost and famine. On the eve of her sixteenth birthday, snow fell for the first time in a century. The girl from

the north watched the blizzard with dismay, for she knew that it was her doing, though she could not explain how, or why. Her tears froze before they fell to the ground, plinking in the packed dirt like diamonds. One by one she gathered these gems and placed them in a handkerchief. She left before the villagers could tell her to flee.

"It's really coming down out there, isn't it?" says a different bartender, interrupting the tale. Your bartender left hours ago.

The new one gestures toward the window with the glass he's cleaning. You extricate yourself from the crook of your countryman's arm and watch with delight as fat raindrops slap the window.

"You Americans must've brought the winter with ya."

Of course.

You finish your beer with a decisive swig and grab your storyteller's hand.

"Want to go grab some tea at my place?" you say. It seems like the proper British euphemism.

"I guess so," he says, teasing. He drags the syllables like a sullen six-year-old.

"Oh, c'mon. You owe me the end of a story."

"Who says that's not how it ends?"

"I do."

"What if that's as far as I remember?"

"Then you'll just have to make it up."

The two of you tip more than you should, and stumble into the storm. His breath surrounds you like a fog, his mouth close to your ear and mumbling nonsense words like a mantra. *Home, home, home*.

Ice followed the girl wherever she went. Trees fell and shattered in her wake. She walked over glazed rivers and paused waterfalls, puddles of glass and ponds like mirrors. Frozen fish, stuck solid and glazed with water, gazed up her dress. When her shadow could no longer be glimpsed on the horizon, the water would thaw, leaving scarlet catfish and rosy piranha, blushed with the sights they had seen.

She traveled from village to village, but none would take her in, for the weather she brought was cruel to cattle and bad for crops. After many moons and snow-streaked roads, she reached the sea. She could walk no more. Lonely, she sat on the sand and cried cold tears.

"Why do you cry?"

The girl wiped her eyes and looked up. A man was offering her a handkerchief of red silk. His hair was pale, his eyes opalescent. His breath, like hers, was visible.

"I would think a woman as beautiful as yourself would have little cause for tears."

He laid a frigid hand on her shoulder. His hair licked about his face like flames, but there was something icy lurking in his eyes. He was too beautiful to

trust, and yet his voice made it impossible for her to do otherwise. He spoke the language of the cold she carried with her.

"I cannot stay anywhere. Everything I touch turns to ice," said the girl.

"Why don't you return home?"

The girl did not speak. She stared at her bare feet.

"Ah, no. Of course you can't. A disappointment there, a danger here."

"Where will I go? Who will have me?"

The man smiled and sank down beside her. They sat silently for a moment, safe in a cloud of condensed air.

"Perhaps a story might help to pass the time while you decide."

The girl smiled, shyly.

"Perhaps."

I was not always alone. Once, I had brothers and sisters. Once. Once I had a Father. Once I had wings.

Once I had sunlight.

It was my appointed task to coax the rising Sun from its nightly realm, to gently whisper Her awake, and so I was called Morningstar. Some say I was led to fall because I loved the Sun more than my Father. Another age, another Icarus? Perhaps they are right. Some of my brothers have accused me of loving too much, of caring too deeply, but one could argue that it was my Father who perhaps loved too little, and almost certainly too late. Still, there are those will proclaim I simply grew tired of the Sun, and sought a more forgiving vocation. They say that I left to find some distant land where I might soothe my cracked

lips and sun-spoiled skin. My scorched half-soul. They too may have the truth of it. But it matters little. I fell, one way or another, as we all do. If it hurt me more deeply than it will you, it was only because I had so very far to fall.

It was, in the end, inevitable. I fell early in the morning of a day not so very different from this one. No more cruelty inherent in this part of my Father's plan than any other.

Indeed, perhaps out of kindness or perhaps simply because I had once been my Father's most beloved son, He bequeathed me a realm to rule in His glorious name. It was a world warmer than any sun and there was some comfort to be found in the flames, in the familiarity of amber and ochre, scarlet and white. A dollhouse crafted for His broken toy. A prison for the prodigal son. But boundaries can be made bearable when one is given a way in which to wile away the centuries, and so, I was content—for a time. I built castles out of solid air, seas of liquid stone. It was a world of contradictions with none greater than myself. I fashioned my army a sanctuary of sulfur and smoke, a shelter where my fallen friends and I might take some rest, safe from the mocking eyes of brothers who would no longer acknowledge the stubborn pull of familial blood. I became an architect, an artist, and a healer. I reigned over my kin with a fair and sympathetic hand, vowing to tend to those in my care more fairly than my Father had tended to those in His.

All in all, it should have made for a very comfortable arrangement.

But I knew that I no longer belonged in a world of warmth. The flames licking at my feet, the serpents of smoke that wound their way around my limbs, and perhaps even the barely quenched fires in the eyes of those who had stood

with me in battle left me sick with longing for a home where I was no longer welcome. And I knew then that it was this, and not the boiling sea I had been tossed upon, that would make me a prisoner. I knew that I must flee to find another world in which I might reign and reign alone, far from the fires of both sun and brimstone. But my Father had made such an escape all but impossible. And so I created my own world, buried within the one that had been fashioned for me. I tunneled deep, leaving layer upon layer of soot and ash in my wake, until I came to a cavern that would suit my purposes. There, at the ninth circle, I quelled the heat of Hell with snow, and carved a throne of ice.

"The ninth circle of hell is for storytellers, by the way," he says, mouth warm against your cold skin.

He had told you at the bar that he was reading Dante. Only you would find a New Jersey academic in Earl's Court.

"I thought the ninth circle was for traitors. Shouldn't storytellers be in the eighth circle?"

Lying next you, he traces the line of your hip with a finger and smiles.

"The eighth circle is for liars," he says. "Don't you think the best stories do more? Don't you think they betray?"

"Betray who?"

"The characters. The writer. The reader. The listener."

He wiggles his eyebrows. I laugh.

"You're just stalling. Finish the story."

My Father did not know that I had built a new kingdom. Slowly the ice began to spread, from circle to circle, and land to land, until the earth froze and cracked like blackened flesh upon a spit. My father mended it in time, but there is still snow to be found at its poles, where portions of Hell escaped. Some day the snow will spread, and on that morning I will once again cradle the world in the palm of my chilled hands. And this time, I will not court the Sun from its hiding place. I will find a new lover, one made of ice, rather than fire. Hades has his Persephone, but even he must lose her to the light from time to time. I long for a woman who will not shy away from a snowy bed, or tremble against my cold frame. One who will wear a cape of frost-browned reeds and ice-glazed furs. One to whom I can give a crown of icicles that will never melt and a scepter with an orb fashioned from rock I've chiseled from the moon's glowing face. One who can sit on the throne of Hell without catching a chill.

The man looked expectantly at the cold, young girl. She chewed her lip for a moment before meeting his gaze.

"But won't the Devil and his bride be lonely?"

He smiled.

"Perhaps. But is it not better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven?"

"Maybe. But won't he be serving either way? If his father knows everything, won't he already know that the Devil is going to turn the world to ice?"

The man frowned.

"Perhaps His Father doesn't know as much as He would like everyone to believe."

The girl smiled sadly.

"Maybe not. But he knew the Devil would ask a sad, strange girl to be his bride. And I think he knew she'd say no."

The girl stood up and brushed the sand from her dress. She handed the storyteller back his handkerchief. With one last glance back toward the warm land that had never been hers, she strode onto a frozen sea.

The two of you lie, sweaty and spent, in the hotel room. You should leave, but the snow outside makes you reluctant to abandon a warm bed.

"Some say the world will end in fire, some say in ice," you say. "From what I've tasted of desire, I hold with those who favor fire."

He snorts. "That's great. Who is that?"

"Frost," you say, and both laugh.

"I'll have to claim that for my own."

"You'll just mess it up. Like poor Dante."

"Hey. Everything I know about your man comes from Wikipedia. I couldn't have passed college English without it."

"I thought you were writing about him?"

"Oh. Yeah. Well, I'm translating the *Inferno* from English into easy-to-read Italian. My boss thinks a dumbed-down version might sell well as a textbook for high school language classes."

You hide your disappointment well. This is a minor betrayal, after all.

"Where'd you learn Dante?" he asks.

"In school. I'm an English professor. Creative writing, largely. Some comparative lit."

You see the inevitable response in the shift of his brows, the slight smirk. Those who can't do…

"Have you published anything?" he asks, and you resist the urge to wince.

Instead, you merely pause before you utter the name of the last book, and try not to grimace when he says he has never heard of it. No one has.

"So, where's my happily ever after?" you ask, breaking the awkward silence.

"That ending wasn't happy enough?"

"Try harder, Dante."

The girl eventually reaches a land free of people. It's an expanse of snow, a nation well suited to her special condition. She rarely thinks of the lands she's had to leave behind. But sometimes, on particularly chilly days, she heads to rocky outcroppings to the south of her home, where hot water flows. There, she'll dip her feet in the soothing springs, and watch her breath meet the steam until she cannot tell which cloud came from her mouth, and which came from boiling water beneath her. And so she stays, happily ever after, perched precariously between Heaven and Hell.

"The end," he says, yawning.

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"Where'd she go? Canada?"

"Iceland, of course."

"Clever," you say, though it really isn't. "But that's not what I'd call a happy ending."

"Mmph," he responds, already half-asleep. Several minutes later, you feel the steady thrum of snoring against your chest. He's looks dead. He'll also likely enough soon be dead to you, and so you turn away, trying to follow his lead. But you can't sleep and so you lie awake, listing alternate endings for the girl who brought the bad weather.

Maybe she really is a superhero, and she uses her powers to put out fires or to save drowning kittens. She'll have a flashy title like The Ice Princess or The Snow Queen. She'll wear gloves that will ensure she won't turn her many suitors into ice sculptures. She'll have a sidekick and a kickass car and a polar bear cub. Look up! In the sky! Is it a snowstorm? Is it a hurricane? No! Hooray! The Ice Woman Cometh! She'll save the day and get the guy, or the girl, or the world, but she'll get something, damn it.

Or maybe she's not a superhero. Maybe she accepts the Devil's offer. Maybe she says yes, and together they take over the world. She'll wear diamonds made of water, and a crown of icicles, and everyone will bow at her frosty little feet. She'll never have to worry about fitting in, because she'll fit in everywhere. The universe will be her tundra, and the Devil her dance partner.

He will fiddle and she will give him his due, and together, they will create a hell on earth. A world built for two.

No, this is what really happens. The girl returns to her homeland, and leaves her father frigid and dead with one touch of her tiniest finger. She frees her siblings and her mother and their subjects from his tyrannical rule, and together they rebuild a nation. Future poets will sing ballads of the Good White Queen, and they will hold a winter festival in her honor. She will live happily ever after.

Or, perhaps…

You wake early. Yawning, you stretch against the man's side. He doesn't move. You gaze at his face, and ghost a hand over his unshaven cheek. For a moment, you ponder staying. But the urge soon passes, and you rise from the bed to gather your clothes. Dressing, you steal glances out the window. The city is white. You wonder whether the blizzard was your fault, knowing you could not have changed it, even if it was.

Sighing, you touch the man's back, cold and pale in the blue morning light.

You wonder if you have left him in the ninth circle, frozen in a world free of stories and sex.

He breathes.

Perhaps not.

You leave disappointed. His story was lacking, but you have little to say on the subject, standing here in the wet snow beneath his hotel window. The girl

lives. The girl dies. It matters little. It's not the story you were looking for. He could have given her bliss, a lover, a kingdom, a plane ticket home. A good review. A pat on the head. He could have forgiven a sad, strange girl for leaving. He could free her from a prison of ice. He could even give her a successful career, a happy marriage to the bartender and fat grandkids. But he won't. Those in the ninth circle so rarely do.

You don't feel the cold wind as you walk back to the library. You don't notice the slight slip of your heels against the icy pavement. You are too busy writing a story in your head. You are trying to memorize the first paragraph, furiously constructing characters on the fly so that when you reach the library, you'll be able to simply put pen to wet, rippled notebook paper. You will place your heroine in a bar, and your hero in a bed, and you will try and write a story with enough fire to melt an icy prison wall

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VITA

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